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BRAVE AND BOLD

A DIFFERENT COMPLETE STORY EVERY WEEK

No. 30

THE MYSTERIOUS
MILLIONAIRE
or The Queerest Job on Record



Tom was obliged to submit, and they carried him to the water's edge and laid him in the bottom of a small sailboat.

BRAVE & BOLD

A Different Complete Story Every Week

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THE MYSTERIOUS MILLIONAIRE;

OR,

The Queerest Job on Record.

By MATT ROYAL.

CHAPTER I.

"Boy!"

"Yes, sir."

"Come here. What are you looking for?"

"For work, sir."

"Work!"

"Yes, sir. Can you give me something to do?"

"I can, indeed. Step right in here. Be quick!"

Young Tom Walcott had good reason to feel surprised. He had been four weeks vainly seeking employment in New York; he had tramped the streets till his shoes were almost worn off his feet; he had met with discouragements and rebuffs sufficient to knock the hope out of any but the bravest and most persevering, and now, just when he had about given up the task, just when it seemed impossible for him to find employment, he heard the cheering news we have recorded.

It was a singular meeting in more respects than one. Tom was going along Wall Street about dusk in the evening, strutting along moodily with his head cast down and his hands thrust deep in his trousers pockets, when a door of one of the offices in front of him suddenly opened, and a man thrust his head out.

He glanced nervously up and down and across the street, and was just about to go in again when his eye fell on Tom. He then began the conversation with which our story opens.

"Come right in here, boy," he said, as he held the office door open. "Come in quick, for I'm in a hurry."

His manner showed that he was under the influence of strong

excitement, though he was not intoxicated, as the young pedestrian at first supposed.

He was a big, portly man of about fifty-five years of age. His face was clean-shaven and his hair was an iron-gray. He was dressed in the height of fashion.

His emotion, the young lad thought, ill became him. He seemed like a man that seldom emerged from an aristocratic impassivity.

He closed and locked the door and led the youth through an office in which there were desks and chairs, to an inner apartment which was elegantly furnished.

"Sit down," he said, taking a chair himself. "What is your name?"

"Tom Walcott, sir."

"Where do you come from?"

"The village of Irving, Massachusetts."

"Stranger here?"

"Yes, sir. I'll tell you my whole——"

"No, you won't. I'm in too big a hurry. You say you want work?"

"Yes, sir."

"Quick, then, get at it. You look like a boy I can trust, and I'll take the risk. Here are five dollars. Put it in your pocket; you'll need it."

While the lad stared in absolute bewilderment, fingering the bills that represented ten times as much capital as he had had on his person, the gentleman quickly took stock of his prepossessing exterior—the well-chiseled face, frank and fearless in its expres-

sion, the fine head, and the superbly knit figure that showed suppleness and strength.

He noted that, though the clothes were shabby, the wearer had the manners and dignity of a gentleman.

He was satisfied with the inspection, for he exclaimed:

"Boy, I am glad I met you so opportunely. I'll swear to your honesty. Begin at once."

"What am I to do, sir?"

"First of all, you're to keep all affairs between you and me secret. Can you do that?"

"I can."

"Do you promise?"

"I do."

"Good! Go then immediately to Central Park. Enter by the Fifty-ninth Street gate. Proceed to the Mall, and take note of the first tree direct east of the farther end of it. Count a dozen steps from that tree in the direction of the nearest bench, wherever it may be, and when you find that spot——"

"Well, sir?"

"Sit down."

"Sit down!"

"Yes, and remain seated on the grass till some one comes along and speaks to you."

"And then?" asked Tom, amazed beyond expression.

"You will listen to every word that person says to you, and be sure to remember it. You must not look up. You must not speak to the person. Remain silent till you report to me."

"I understand, sir."

"You will notice which direction the person takes on leaving you, but you must not follow. At the end of five minutes, however, you will take the same direction and walk in a straight line—no matter what the distance may be—till you come to a bench. There you will stop, and be careful no one notices you."

"I'll be watchful, sir."

"Underneath that bench you will find something! Bring it to me without delay. Now be off as quick as you can. It's a matter of the gravest importance. You should lose not one moment unnecessarily."

"What do you expect me to find, sir?"

"Ask no questions," was the reply, somewhat tartly uttered. "Bring me whatever you find under the bench and report the person's exact words. Go!"

There was something in the man's earnest, excited manner that forbade Tom to hesitate or ask further questions. He leaped to his feet, seized his hat, and made for the door, determined to carry out the work, foolish and whimsical as it appeared.

"Stop!"

It was the man that spoke. Tom turned and saw him trembling with suppressed excitement. He saw him reach to a glass of colored liquid on the table and gulp down a portion of it, presumably to quiet his nerves.

"Young man," said he, "one word before you go. I am compelled by circumstances to trust to an entire stranger on a matter of life and——"

"Look here, sir; you have trusted me with five dollars I have not yet earned, and I'll try to prove to you that, whatever lack of satisfaction I give you in other respects, you will have no fault to find with me on that score."

"Begone, then, and hasten back. I'll await you here. Tap lightly twice on the door when you return."

"I will, sir."

Tom hurried out of the office. Five minutes later he was on an "L" train flying uptown.

His mind was filled with the wildest conjectures.

What was the meaning of this strange mission on which he was being sent and for which he had been so liberally paid? Who was this man that was willing to accept a stranger at his face value? Was he demented? Was he crazy?

"By George, I may have done wrong in taking his money," thought Tom. "He can't be right in his head or he'd never send me on such a ridiculous errand—me, a stranger, too. I—— But no, he didn't look insane, either. He looked like a shrewd, level-headed man, laboring under temporary excitement. Like Hamlet, 'there's method in his madness.' I'll follow the job through as I promised, anyhow, and see what comes of it."

It was a new sensation to Tom to have money in his pocket, and to ride on a train instead of tramping the streets. He had the wherewithal now to appease his biting hunger by a good supper at a restaurant, but his conscience would not let him do this till he had removed his employer's anxiety.

The man had paid him in advance for work which demanded the greatest haste, and on which, it seemed, grave and important issues hung. When that work was done it would be time to think of supper.

Some men can think faster when they are walking. Motion seems to stimulate their minds. When Tom had got off the train, and while he was walking to the Fifty-ninth Street gate, he tried to build some kind of theory that would account for the mysterious errand on which he was being sent, but it was no use. It was a puzzle for which he could find no solution.

He walked fast till he came to the end of the Mall, and then stopped and looked about him in a careless kind of way.

There were numbers of people driving and walking through the park, but none of them could see him unless they came close, as it had now got pretty dark, and he stood in the shadow of the foliage.

He located the tree without any trouble. He sauntered over to it, and then looked around for the nearest bench.

There were two that appeared equidistant from the tree, but on a careful examination he found that one was a few feet closer than the other.

He counted a dozen steps toward it from the tree.

He sat down.

CHAPTER II.

So far as he could see there was no one around. The park in the immediate vicinity seemed deserted. Voices were wafted to him on the breeze—the chatting of jovial companions, the laughing of children, and the noisy argument of some street Arabs at a distance—and he could hear the din of the nearer part of the city—the rattle of vehicles, the click of the horses' hoofs on the hard pavement, the rumble of the elevated trains, and the jingling bells of the street cars—all of which seemed to emphasize the stillness immediately about him, and to make him feel very much alone.

"This is the best-paid job I've ever had," he muttered when he had been sitting on the grass for about ten minutes and had not seen a living soul within two hundred yards of him; "but I forgot to get a clause put into the bargain which would release me in case no one comes along. I wonder how long I'm supposed to wait here?"

The grass was damp, the dew being heavy, and it was not pleasant for a thinly-clad person to sit in it; still, Tom did not mind that. The consciousness of having materially bettered his standing would have reconciled him to things more unpleasant than sitting in wet grass. It was the first inch of progress he had made in many weeks.

By way of passing the time and keeping himself company, he recited some pieces he had learned while at school—Gray's "Elegy," Shelley's "Ode to a Skylark," and Bryant's "Prairies." He was starting on a canto of "Childe Harold," when his ear caught the sound of a footfall behind him.

He turned his head, and—lo! within ten yards of him was a lady. She was coming directly toward him, walking quite fast.

His heart beat more quickly when he sighted her, for he divined she was the person who was to meet and speak to him. He himself was to say nothing—absolutely nothing; but he was to hear and remember every word addressed to him.

On she came, and in another moment she was by his side. She appeared not to see the figure reclining in the grass, and almost ran against him.

"Oh, excuse me!" she exclaimed; and she gave a nervous little start.

She was evidently frightened.

Tom sat perfectly still with his ears on the alert to catch every word of the mysterious message, but he heard nothing more than the rustle of her skirts, and looking up, he saw that she had passed on. She was walking faster than ever, as if she dreaded pursuit.

Tom had got one glance at her face. The light had shone on it just as she spoke. He saw she was beautiful. He was sure he would know her again by her superb figure, her graceful walk, her golden hair, and a general impression he could not define. She was attired in a dark-green dress.

Soon she was out of sight, and he was impatiently waiting for the "real messenger" whose words it was so important for him to remember.

He could not bring himself to think that the lady was the one expected. She had said nothing, and her whole manner had indicated she did not expect to meet any one there—that she had stumbled upon him quite by accident.

A half hour passed and no one else came along.

Tom's patience was exhausted. He had had time to think the matter over, and he reverted to his former theory that his employer was "a bit off." No sane man would employ a person to do such a foolish thing. No sane man would employ a stranger.

"Confound it! I'm making an ass of myself sitting here; I'll go back to the fellow and return him his money. Yes, that's the only wise thing to do. I don't want to get pneumonia. Let me see. Which way did that woman go? As she was the only one came along I may as well take the same course and thus follow the instructions."

Tom waited a little while longer, and seeing no one coming his way, he got up and started off in the direction taken by the lady. He took care to walk in a straight line toward the point where she had disappeared, as the instructions had been very explicit in that regard. He was to proceed till he came to a bench.

It was now quite dark, and there was no lamp in the vicinity where he last saw the woman. But, when he had proceeded a little farther, a light from a distant lamp enabled him to pick his way.

By and by he came in sight of a bench. It was directly in his path. There was a man seated on it. He appeared to be asleep.

Just as Tom got within a few feet of him the man awoke, arose slowly to his feet, and walked off among the trees. Soon he could be heard whistling nearly fifty yards away.

Tom got down on his knees and searched under the bench. He could find nothing, though he ran his fingers back and forth through the grass.

He had not expected to find anything, for he regarded the whole thing as the empty freak of an insane man, and the meeting with

the lady purely accidental; but it was more satisfactory to complete his contract.

He felt the grass from one end of the bench to the other, and not anything did he find—not a thing but a piece of orange peel.

"Pshaw!" he muttered. "I might have known by the man's manner there was something wrong with him. He's likely got the D. T.'s. I'll go back and tell him the whole trip was a failure, and return him his money. I'll tell him if he can give me some sensible employment I'm willing to work at it."

He was about to throw the orange peel away, when it occurred to him that it would be wise to take it, just to show the man what a ridiculous thing he had done. It might help to bring him to his senses.

He put the orange peel in his pocket. He left the park and hurried downtown. He paid his carfare out of his own money—the half dollar he had left when he first encountered the liberal but eccentric stranger. He would not break into the five dollars.

Arrived at Wall Street he sought out the office and located it after some difficulty. Wondering what could be the occupation of so singular a person, he looked up at the sign on the window and read:

"THE WALL STREET COMPANY,
"Bankers and Brokers,
"HENRY PAYNE, Manager."

He tapped lightly on the door twice, and it opened with a suddenness that quite startled him.

"Come in," he heard a voice whisper, and the same moment his arm was seized and he was almost dragged into the dark office.

"Did you succeed, boy? Did you succeed?" he heard the voice ask.

"No, sir, I did not," he replied, and he tried to release his arm, while with the other he groped around in the darkness.

"Oh, dear!" he heard the gentleman exclaim in a tone of disappointment.

The latter turned on an electric light, and his pale face was revealed. He was trembling more than when Tom had last seen him, showing that the strain of suspense and excitement had been severe on him.

"Do you mean to tell me you have failed, boy?" he asked, looking Tom squarely in the face.

There was suspicion in his glance.

"I do," said Tom, "and I want to give you your money back."

The suspicious look fled from the man's face.

"Hang the money," he exclaimed. "Why didn't you do what I told you?"

"I did."

"You went to the park?"

"Yes."

"And saw no one? Heard nothing? Found nothing?"

"Not a thing, sir. I have actually nothing to report."

"Oh, dear!"

The man sank into a chair near the table, and, leaning his head on his hand, stared moodily at the light. Deep disappointment was written in his face.

For some moments he sat silent, biting his finger nails like one lost in perplexity.

Then he arose and paced up and down the floor, muttering to himself, and now and then scratching his head. He paid no more attention to Tom, who stood watching him, than if he had been a piece of furniture.

"I think, sir, I had better—"

"Shut up."

"I beg your pardon."

"Sit down."

Tom obeyed, wondering to himself if he was in the company of a madman, and resolving to take the first opportunity to get out.

Suddenly the man stopped in his walk, and, turning to Tom, said:

"Are you sure you found the right tree?"

"Perfectly sure. The nearest one to the east of the farther end of the Mall."

"That's it. Did you sit in the grass as bidden?"

"I did, for nearly an hour."

"And no one came to you?"

"No one came within fifty yards of me except——"

"Except whom?"

"A young woman."

"A young woman? Good heavens! why didn't you say so? What did she do? What did she say?"

"Nothing. She was some one who just happened to come along that way. She nearly stumbled over me in the darkness. She was dressed——"

"Never mind her dress. What did she say? Speak quick!"

"Nothing. She passed on, going very quickly toward——"

"Did she not speak? Did she not say something?"

"Not a word, only just when her foot struck me she said——"

"What?"

"Oh, excuse me! and hurried——"

"Ha! I thought so. Go on, boy, go on."

"That's all, sir."

"Ha! she said: 'Oh, excuse me! Just so. Go on. You followed afterward?'"

"Yes, perhaps half an hour afterward——"

"And found the bench?"

"Yes, but there was nothing under it."

"Nothing! Did you look carefully—did you search the grass?"

"Thoroughly."

"And did you not find something?"

"Nothing."

"Curse the luck!"

"There was absolutely nothing under the bench but——"

"But what? Speak quick, for mercy's sake. What did you find?"

"Only a bit of orange peel."

"Ha! Did you pick it up?"

"Yes."

"An orange peel! Let me see it—let me see it."

He had leaped to his feet, and was now holding out his hands eagerly as if he was to receive some precious jewel.

Tom, overwhelmed with amazement, and staring like an owl, drew the orange peel from his pocket and handed it to the gentleman.

The latter, fairly wild with excitement, grasped it, ran to the table, and turning on two more lights, sat down to examine the simple object that its discoverer had so nearly left behind.

Presently he uttered a cry of pleasure, wheeled around, and grasping Tom's hand, exclaimed:

"Boy, you're a treasure. You enter my employ at once. Here are twenty-five dollars for your services to-night. I wouldn't have lost this for twice that sum."

"Now, young man, you can go, but I want to see you again to-morrow at nine o'clock. Where are you staying?"

"I have no abode, sir."

"No abode! Ah, I forgot; you said you had been having ill-luck. Well, we'll fix that all right. You're to enter my employ. I have work for you—great work. I like you; you appear dis-

creet and honest, and reliable, and I think we'll get along; I'll give you an address at which you'll call to-night."

He hastily scribbled a few lines on a paper, and, inclosing it in an envelope, handed it to Tom.

"There," he said; "present that at the address and you will get board. Remain there for the present. They're respectable people, and will take you on my recommendation."

"Thank you, sir."

"To-morrow you must get a new suit. Here," and he forced another bill into Tom's hand.

Tom went out into the night and made rapidly for the nearest restaurant. For the first time in weeks he was going to have a square meal. His spirits had risen with his new success.

He seated himself at a table and gave an order for a meal that, earlier in the day, would have appeared a banquet to him. He intended to allow himself about half an hour for eating, and then start for his new boarding house.

There were about twenty other persons seated in the dining room.

Presently a gentleman came in and seated himself at the same table with Tom, and directly opposite to him. He gave his order to a waiter, and began to read a newspaper.

He was a very dark-complexioned, rather good-looking young fellow of about twenty-four years of age, and he was very stylishly, and even a little loudly, dressed. His mustache was oiled and curled in a way that showed he was a bit of a dandy.

He eyed Tom over the top of his paper without the latter noticing it, and a peculiar smile played about the corner of his mouth.

By and by he spoke, using words that one stranger might address to another without giving offense.

"It's not quite so warm to-night."

"No."

Tom looked up, took him in in a glance and went on eating.

"I'll tell you where a man ought to sleep such nights as these."

"Where?"

"Under a bench in Central Park."

Tom started and darted a second look at the speaker. There was nothing remarkable in the words, but they touched upon a thought uppermost in his mind at the moment. He had been mentally reviewing his late adventure in the park.

He made no reply, and showed by his manner that he had no desire to carry on a conversation.

Presently the stranger spoke again, this time to the waiter:

"Bring me a couple of oranges."

"Yes, sir."

"And look here, Jeems."

"Yes, sir."

"Bring them peeled. I have a great antipathy to an orange peel."

"Yes, sir," said the waiter, and he departed, bowing.

Again Tom got a shock.

The stranger had for the second time mentioned an object associated with his late adventure. The mention of any other objects in the world would have passed without notice.

Was it chance or design?

Tom concealed his surprise, and for a few moments scrutinized the stranger sharply, taking care to do it furtively.

Another peculiar thing now happened. The stranger arose, laid a coin on the table and, seizing his hat and cane, went off without waiting for the fruit which he had ordered to be served.

Tom could not refrain from turning around in his chair to look at him.

He saw the stranger stop at the desk, present his check and a

coin, light a cigar, and walk out. Not a remarkable thing about him. Not an action that was not strictly conventional. He did not even look back when he gained the street.

The only thing was the amazing fact of his having mentioned a bench in Central Park and an orange peel.

"Wonderful coincidence!" thought Tom, and the matter then went out of his mind—at least for the time.

When he left the restaurant he hurried to the address given him by his new employer.

The place was on Fourth Street. He found it without any difficulty. It was a nice-looking brick building, formerly two residences, one of which, as a brass plate on the door showed, was occupied by a physician.

Tom went to the other door and rang the bell and presented his letter.

A stylish-looking, middle-aged lady appeared, who looked somewhat askant at him when she had surveyed his exterior, and in a rather ascetic voice asked him what he wanted.

"I want to board here," said Tom.

"Board here? You! You must go somewhere else, sir."

"I have a recommendation, madam—"

"It makes no difference. I cannot take any boarders to-night."

"Perhaps—"

She was about to close the door in his face when he handed her the letter.

Her eye caught the handwriting even before she touched it. She opened it, glanced over it, and in the twinkling of an eye her whole manner changed. She smiled affably on Tom and said:

"You must excuse me, I didn't know that—"

"That's all right, ma'am," said Tom, good-naturedly, trying to ease her embarrassment.

"Come right in. You can board here as long as you find it agreeable," said she.

"Thanks."

Tom entered and found the house well and even sumptuously furnished. It did not take long to arrive at satisfactory terms; they were surprisingly low for such a pretentious boarding house, and he was soon led upstairs to the room he was to occupy, which was luxurious when compared with any other room he had ever slept in before. He was treated more as a guest than a boarder, and he rightly attributed this fact to the talismanic power of his employer's letter.

He had no more adventures that night. He slept soundly and was up betimes in the morning. He saw no one in the house but the landlady, her daughter and the servant who waited upon him.

His first act of the day was to buy a new ready-made suit, hat and shoes. When he had donned them the transformation was so complete that he hardly knew himself when he looked in a mirror. As he said to himself, it was the most effective disguise he had ever worn.

He was in the vicinity of Wall Street as early as eight o'clock, patiently waiting for the hour at which he should call at his employer's office.

He had forgotten to ask the man his name, and he had not thought it well to ask his landlady, considering that he had borne a letter of introduction from him to her.

About nine o'clock he walked up the street and entered the office. He saw five or six clerks at their desks, working busily, and a middle-aged man, wearing spectacles, seated at a table examining some papers. They all looked up on his entrance.

"I want to see the boss," said Tom, thinking this the best and quickest way to find the gentleman with whom he had the appointment.

"Well," said the man with the spectacles, "what do you want?"

"I want the boss."

"What do you want with him?"

"I want to see him—to speak to him."

"Well?"

"Is he anywhere about?"

"I think so."

The two stared at each other. The man spoke first.

"What do you want to say to the boss?"

The clerks began to smile; and Tom, not relishing the idea of standing in a ridiculous light, spoke up a little sharply:

"My business is private. The gentleman himself would not care to have me discuss it with his subordinates!"

The emphasis laid on the last word amused the clerks so that they could not conceal their desire to laugh outright; but it angered the spectacled gentleman, who sat up straight in his chair and exclaimed:

"If you have any business with me, state it quickly. If not, get out. We have no time to waste here."

"Don't get excited," said Tom, smiling in a provokingly cool way, though he had no intention of giving offense. "I have no business with you at all. It's the boss I want."

"I'm the boss here, sir."

"Well, you're not the man I want."

"Who do you want, then?"

"The gentleman I saw last night. He told me to call here this morning. Are you the head man here?"

"I think so."

The clerks could now be heard tittering behind their desks.

"Is there no manager above you?"

"There's the general manager, who has just returned."

"That's the man. Kindly tell him Tom Walcott has arrived and wishes to see him."

Feeling that the wind had been somewhat taken out of his sails, the spectacled gentleman—who was the manager, Henry Payne—directed one of the clerks to tap on the door of the general manager's private office and ask him if he had made an appointment with a Mr. Walcott.

"You'll find he has," said Tom. "It was at his request I came here."

In a few moments the general manager himself walked out, and, addressing himself to the manager said:

"Where is the man who says he has an appointment with me?"

Tom looked up at the speaker, and then nearly collapsed with astonishment and chagrin.

He beheld a complete stranger—a man he had never seen in his life before.

CHAPTER III.

"I beg your pardon!" Tom stammered. "There must be some mistake."

"I should say there must," replied the manager, "and it appears to be on your side. Who do you want, anyhow? Do you know his name?"

"I do not, but he is the head of this place."

"Then you are in the wrong office. The general manager is the head man here."

But Tom was so certain he was in the same office in which the scene had been enacted the night before that he doggedly held his ground, much to the delight of the clerks, who were not every day treated to such a diversion as this.

"Perhaps it's the proprietor," he suggested.

"That is ourselves," said the general manager; "except the

chief stockholder, and he is on his way to Europe. Sailed four days ago."

"One more question," said the tenacious Tom: "How long have you occupied this office?"

"About fifteen years," was the reply.

There was no use trying to swim against a tide like this. Tom made the most graceful and speedy retreat he could, in order to escape the questions which the wondering manager was about to ask him.

When he got outside he looked up at the windows, expecting to find he had made a mistake; but—no! he read, as plainly as the evening before, the words:

"THE WALL STREET COMPANY,

"Bankers and Brokers,

"HENRY PAYNE, Manager."

"Well, this is the most mysterious thing I've seen yet," he said to himself as he walked away. "If it wasn't for the twenty-five dollars I hold in my pocket I'd swear it was all a dream. But the money is tangible enough. It shows that at least I have my senses. Who the deuce can my employer be? I'd go back to the office and made further inquiries if I hadn't already made a fool of myself there."

He turned into Broadway and trudged along through the crowd. His brain was busy as he went. He tried to decide the question as to whether he ought to search for his mysterious employer or at once sever all connection with him.

He would then and there have decided on the latter course had it not been for the money he held, which he called "unearned increment." He thought he ought to return at least a part of the money.

He made up his mind at last and started at once for Fourth Street. He must leave a boarding house secured by the influence of a man with whom he wanted to part company.

He met the landlady in the hall.

"There's been a gentleman here to see you, Mr. Walcott," she said.

"Indeed! Who was he?"

"I don't know. He said he had appointed to meet you at nine o'clock. He called within five minutes after you left. He was much disappointed."

Here was a new light on the matter. It set Tom thinking he must have made a mistake the night before. The man meant the meeting to be at the boarding house and not at the office.

Still, that would not account for the mystery of the office itself.

"Did he leave any message?" he asked.

"Yes; he said he would either call during the day or send you word."

It struck Tom as strange the woman did not know who the man was, when it was the same person whose recommendation she had so quickly accepted.

"Did you see the man, Mrs. Moffat?" he asked.

She seemed to divine what was passing in his mind and, blushing, answered:

"No; it was the servant who went to the door. Ah! here is a letter for you on the hat stand. I did not see it till now."

Tom took the letter and eagerly opened it.

"DEAR WALCOTT," it ran. "We misunderstood each other last night, it seems. Come to me at once. I am at the Taylor House, Jersey City. Don't delay a moment. Inquire for Mr. Hardy."

There was a sort of explanation for everything now except the mystery of his employer's not being known at his own office.

Tom took the ferry across to Jersey City and entered the Taylor House.

"Room 37," was the clerk's answer to his inquiry for Mr. Hardy; "I think you'll find him in."

Tom walked quickly upstairs.

"Show me 37," he said to a bell-boy.

When he came to the door he heard voices inside. He did not wish to play the eavesdropper, so without delay he tapped loudly.

The door was opened by a man, at the first sight of whom Tom started back in surprise.

It was the stranger he had seen in the restaurant the night before—the mustached young dandy that had astonished him by mentioning two objects then uppermost in his mind.

Tom drew back; whereupon the young man smiled, and bowing threw open the door.

"Step in," he said, and then he passed Tom and went quickly downstairs.

Tom looked into the room and, to his delight, saw the man he was looking for—his new employer.

"Ah, Walcott," called out the latter when he saw him. "Come in here. Close the door. That's a good fellow. Sit down a moment."

Tom entered and took a chair.

His quick eye noticed that the gentleman was still agitated. He seemed, if anything, in deeper trouble than the night before. There was a redness about his eyelids that prompted the belief he had been crying. In fact, he looked so unhappy and dejected that Tom's heart instantly softened, and the suspicions with which he had entered fled from his mind, or, at least, were temporarily forgotten.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Hardy?" he asked.

"Eh? eh? Did you speak, Walcott?" said his employer, turning around quickly—he had risen from his chair and stepped across the room to lock a door. "What did you say, boy?"

"I asked if I could be of service to you?"

"Of service to me? Well, I should say so. I sent for you purposely. I need you this moment. I want you to perform a great service for me—a secret service. I'll pay you well——"

"You have paid me enough for the present, sir."

"Hush! Don't speak of terms. Leave that to me. Do you know how to get to Staten Island?"

"Yes."

"Good. You will cross at once and take a train to Pleasant Plains. When you arrive there you will inquire the way to the Institution for Homeless Children. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"You are not to go to the institution, but merely follow the way that leads to it. It's a lonely road. You pass under an arched gateway and follow a sidewalk for about a mile till it enters a bush. Here you will notice that there are two railings on the sidewalk, and that these railings commence at the very entrance to the bush. You will count the trees on the right of the railing and that stand within ten feet of it, and stop at the fifteenth tree. You will recognize it by some of the bark being torn off. You will conceal yourself within, say, twenty yards of this tree, and in a place where you can easily see it. Somebody will come along and deposit an article behind that tree. You are to bring me the article, and as good a description as you can of the person."

"Mr Hardy——"

"Hush! I wouldn't have that young man overhear us for the entire world."

"When do you expect this article to be laid behind the tree?"

"Ah, yes; I had forgotten that very important point. Just as

darkness is coming on, and you must arrange to be there before that hour. Now go."

Tom did not like the errand he was being sent on. Besides, he wanted to ask his employer some questions. He felt he had a right to know one or two things.

But the impetuous haste of the gentleman prevented him asking those questions.

"Walcott," said the latter, placing his hands on the lad's shoulders, "if you intend to assist me in this, please start at once." He threw a great deal of pathos into his words. "Go this very moment and relieve a troubled man. I'll reward you well—I'll—I'll—"

"Shish! that'll do, sir. I'll go."

"Good! That's the man. Be off at once. I'll await you at your boarding house."

Five minutes later Tom was crossing the ferry. A half an hour later he was on his way to Staten Island.

He took the train about two o'clock, and after a ride of some twenty-five miles got off at Pleasant Plains.

He loitered around till sundown, and then betook himself to the bush mentioned in the directions. He had no difficulty in finding the place; no difficulty in finding the tree.

Just about dusk he stepped behind a rock to conceal himself, when two dark figures sprang upon him, a cloth was thrown over his head, and he was borne to the ground.

CHAPTER IV.

Tom struggled to get to his feet, but the hands that held him were powerful and forced him back to the ground. The cloth was pulled so tightly about his head that he supposed the intention of his assailants was to smother him.

He tried to shout for help, which made his captors use him the more roughly. One of them struck him on the head, and threatened to repeat the blow if he did not give up resistance and keep quiet.

The sound of an approaching wagon was heard. Thinking it might be some one who would come to his assistance, Tom struggled more desperately than ever, and, as there was but one holding him at the time, he succeeded in tearing the cloth off his face sufficiently to let him cry out.

The same moment the wagon stopped, and a blow descended upon his head that caused him to reel and fall.

Consciousness left him, and he was completely at the mercy of his assailants. They lost no time in putting him in the wagon and covering him up with a piece of old canvas.

The whole thing had occupied but a few moments. Though considerable noise was made, there was little or no chance of any one having heard it, for they were in a very lonely place. It was fully half a mile to the Orphans' Home, and nearly a mile to the public highway.

The captors were but two in number, both very large men, and singularly alike in appearance.

To judge from their dress, and even their looks, few would believe them capable of such an act as they had just been guilty of. Yet their faces expressed considerable brutality.

"Come, Jim," said one of them, "take the lines and let us get out of this. We have the game in our hands at last. We mustn't risk being found out now."

"Wouldn't it be better to wait till it gets a little darker, Mac?"

"What for?"

"To drive through the village."

"No. There's some one likely to come along any moment, and, if he were to wake up and shout, it would put us in an awkward

fix. Drive on. They'll suppose it's one of the teams from the Orphanage."

"We can soon stop his wakin' up."

"No, don't hurt him."

"I don't intend to if he behaves himself."

"What then?"

"Chloroform."

"Splendid! Quick! I hear a buggy coming yonder."

"There you are! He'll not wake up for hours. Now let us light a cigar. Nothing like a cigar to give a man an innocent look. Right through the village?"

"No. Better take the stone road to the left."

Now it happened that the chloroform was weak and badly administered. The man who held the bottle knew very little about the liquid, and seemed to be somewhat afraid of it himself, as if one drop of it brought near the nostrils would have effect.

As a result, Tom was scarcely chloroformed at all, and before the wagon had driven three miles his senses returned.

At the end of an hour or more the wagon came to a stop, and Tom felt about as a man feels who is momentarily expecting some heavy weight to fall on him. Cold shivers ran up and down his back, and his heart beat with the rapidity of genuine fear.

So long as the wagon had rattled along he had not felt this fear; the cessation of motion and the deep silence, broken only by a strange murmuring noise, brought it on.

The men lifted him out of the wagon and bore him along some yards.

A terrible fear that they meant to end his life then and there caused him to raise his arms and tear the cloth from his head.

It was bright enough to see that he was in a very lonely place on the seashore. It was the murmuring of the sea that he had heard.

He saw for the first time the faces of his assailants, and the view gave him very little encouragement. He judged them to be men who would stop at nothing to carry out their purpose.

"What does this outrage mean? Let me go!" he cried.

"Hush. Keep quiet or it'll be the worse for you!" said the man who held his feet.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Hold your tongue! If you speak or make a struggle we'll—"

Tom did struggle as vigorously as his weakened condition would let him, and got for his pains some more hard knocks.

He was obliged to submit, and they tied him fast, hand and foot. Then they carried him to the water's edge and laid him in the bottom of a small sailboat.

While one of the men sat in the boat with Tom, the other drove off in the wagon. This man was gone about half an hour and he returned without the horses and wagon.

He was considerably excited. He hurriedly got into the boat, whispered to his companion, and the two of them snatched up the oars and began to row.

The boat shot out from the land and was soon a considerable distance from it.

Tom, raising himself on his elbow, peered over the gunwale. He thought he could descry a couple of dark forms on the shore.

His movement caused the boat to rock a little, and thus drew the men's attention to him.

"Lie down," said one of them. "If you open your mouth we'll shoot you."

He then whispered something to his companion. The latter nodded and returned an answer, in which Tom caught the word "chloroform."

It was plain that their intention was to chloroform him.

It occurred to Tom that if he could retain his senses, and yet

appear to be unconscious, it would give him a decided advantage in the matter of learning what their purpose was. He had a horror of being stupefied, anyhow.

They dropped their oars for a couple of minutes, and proceeded to hoist a sail.

Tom availed himself of this chance to circumvent their intended act.

Though his hands were bound together at the wrists, he was able to use his fingers a little.

He managed to tear a hole in the lining of his coat, and extract from between it and the cloth a little piece of the wadding. Rolling up two little balls of this wadding he stuffed them in his nostrils, all the time lying quiet in the bottom of the boat.

The men did not notice what he had done. They got the sail in order, hauled in the oars, and, while one of them took a seat at the tiller, the other came forward and knelt at Tom's side.

Tom breathed through his mouth till the man had taken the bottle from his pocket and saturated a handkerchief with its contents.

Then he closed his mouth, and made a pretense of trying to draw his head away.

The man held the handkerchief tightly against his nose for several seconds. Then he took it away and used the bottle again.

This gave Tom a chance to open his mouth and draw in a couple of breaths.

It was too dark for the man to see his face distinctly, especially as he was in the bottom of the boat.

The second time the handkerchief was thoroughly soaked and was kept to Tom's nose till he thought he could hold his breath no longer.

The man now arose. He was satisfied he had made a successful job of it this time. He looked for a moment at the lad, who had every appearance of being unconscious, and then betook himself to the middle of the boat.

Tom opened his mouth and quietly drank in a dozen good breaths.

Then noiselessly raising his hands, he drew forth the wadding that had saved him from the effects of the chloroform, and prepared himself to lie quiet and listen.

He saw the men take a drink from a flask and light their pipes; and presently one of them said:

"I think we can safely pull up at the point, Mac. There's not likely to be any one there at this hour."

"Better not decide till we get there," replied the other. "If necessary we can lay off till about two hours after midnight. Wouldn't wonder if we had a shower before long."

"Mac."

"What?"

"Are you sure we've got the right man?"

"Oh, pshaw! I wish I was as sure of our plan turning out as we want it, and I'd be satisfied."

"It would be a bad mess of things if we had made a mistake."

"Listen how I figure it out, Jim."

"Go ahead."

"First place, this young fellow tallies with the description, doesn't he?"

"Yes, pretty closely."

"Closely enough to make the description a fair one, eh?"

"Yes."

"Now, he came along at the right time, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"And he looked as if he was counting the trees?"

"I thought so."

"So did I. And he stopped at the fifteenth tree and examined the bark, didn't he?"

"Yes; though it may have been accidental."

"Accidental? Bosh! There are not so many coincidences in this world as you think. No stranger could come along and happen to do fifteen expected things in succession; he acted stealthily, too, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"And looked up and down to see if any one was coming, and examined the ground behind the tree, and concealed himself, and carried out the programme in every respect?"

"I guess you're right, Mac. We've got the man that was told to go there and wait."

"Certainly we've got the right man."

"Good-looking chap, too, isn't he?"

"Yes; they'd made a nice-looking couple. She's got darned good taste."

"I believe the very boldness of our plan will bring us success. Nothing succeeds like daring. The scheme is original, brilliant, and especially bold. It is of the kind, too, that disarms rather than invites suspicion."

"I hope so. It would be nice to be worth a million. Oh, my! How I would sport on it! Talk of Italian groves, myrtle bowers, sparkling fountains——"

"You see we are now in a position to shut Master Harry off from other influences, and if we could only combine it with Caleb's scheme——"

"The other girl?"

"Yes."

"Ah, that's the trouble. We'd have to wait. My idea is to manage this thing before he gets back."

After another hour or so they slackened sail and held a short whispered conversation, during which one of them kept a telescope to his eye.

Presently they lowered the sail altogether, and, picking up the oars, began to row easily.

The boat touched something and stopped. One of them got out and the other took up the oars and rowed away from the spot.

After a while he ceased rowing, but worked the oars gently to keep the boat in the one place.

By and by Tom heard the sounds of wheels and the tramp of horses' feet. They came nearer till they were probably but a quarter of a mile away and stopped.

A few moments later the boat began to move in the direction whence the sounds came, the man rowing slowly and cautiously, as if afraid to rely too strongly on whatever signal he had received.

Suddenly it grated on the sand and stopped. Some one took hold of it to steady it and the rower stepped out.

Tom Walcott was thoroughly frightened; he knew that something was going to happen him, but knew not what that something was. He shivered.

To be tied hand and foot, to be a prisoner in a lonely place in the hands of unknown men of undoubtedly bad character, to be the main cause of a series of mysterious acts that could not bear the light of day, and to know that there is no friend near to help, are things not calculated to make one feel very comfortable.

Tom's nervousness was in no way diminishing by what followed.

A cloth was laid over his face and he was seized and lifted out of the boat.

CHAPTER V.

Tom was carried some distance and placed in a cab.

The cab started.

Tom could hear that there was a third man in it.

Who was this third man, who, as yet, had not spoken?

His presence certainly did not tend to give Tom mental tranquillity.

Whoever he was, he showed himself not unaccustomed to this kind of thing, for he lit a cigar, threw his feet carelessly upon the opposite seat and, in general, took things very coolly.

There was so much individuality in him that, despite the darkness, Tom already formed a pretty correct estimate of his character.

"Well," said he, after they had got settled down and the vehicle was humming along nicely, "you succeeded a great deal better than I expected."

"Yes," said Mac; "and we hadn't the slightest trouble. He seems a peculiar kind of duffer—a sort of compound of innocence and cunning. You ought to have seen the way he counted those trees. We spotted him a quarter of a mile off."

"He followed the directions well, eh?"

"He had them down fine."

"He took the bait nicely?"

"Didn't he? I was surprised. Most young uns would have got suspicious when they heard such peculiar directions."

Tom was listening with all his ears, and, in spite of his fear, now ten times greater than ever, he was boiling with rage, for the whole tenor of the words went to show that Hardy had sent him on the errand to get him into trouble.

What on earth did it mean?

Why should Hardy do this to a stranger who had served him so well? Was he in league with these men?

"I'm afraid we're going to have some trouble with the girl, Mac."

"Why?"

"Oh, she's acting rather—— Say, can this fellow hear us?"

"No, he's dosed. If he wakes up this week it'll surprise me."

"Just as well to keep him that way till we hitch him. He'll be easier to get rid of. She seems to have a sort of inkling."

"Pshaw, Caleb! Don't fret about her; I'd wring her neck if she sulked with me. It's not that that troubles me."

"Well?"

"It's whether our information about all this money, and bonds, and stocks, and buildings is correct."

"It's the general belief."

"Well, the public sometimes makes mistakes. Reputed millionaires are often as hard up as ourselves. But there's one thing about it."

"Yes."

"We can't come very badly off anyhow, unless she actually slips out of our hands and goes back on us."

"Hardy telephoned me this afternoon."

The journey became so monotonous that Tom fell asleep.

He was awakened by the vehicle stopping.

The door was thrown open, and, without any loss of time, he was lifted out and carried away.

At the end of some minutes he was deposited on a hard floor and the cloth was removed from his face.

He feigned unconsciousness, keeping his eyes tightly closed, but he could tell there was a light in the room.

"Don't fret, Jim," he heard one of them say, "we've captured the right man."

"Yes, Mac," said his brother, "I agree with you. We found

him at the appointed place, at the appointed time, and under the appointed conditions. We've certainly got the right man."

They loosened the captive's bonds, and, taking the light with them, went out of the room, locking the door after them.

The prisoner, being left alone, said to himself:

"Yes, they've got the right man."

But he was mistaken, and Mac and Jim were sadly mistaken.

They had captured the wrong man.

Investigation carried on in the darkness, by the sense of touch alone, finally convinced Tom Walcott that he was in a room from which it was impossible to escape unaided.

As high as he could reach there was not a window, and there was not even a streak of light to modify the intense darkness.

The room was not at all close, so that he felt sure that air entered somewhere.

The only articles of furniture—he very easily identified them by feeling—were a sofa and a washstand—articles strangely at variance with the nature of the room.

He found the sofa, when he stretched himself upon it, to be an exceedingly comfortable one. The pillows were ordinary bed pillows.

Tom lay thinking of his home away up in Irving, Massachusetts; and this prompts us to tell the reader something more of Tom Walcott's personal history, to let the reader into some of the secrets of his life, so that he may the better understand what he had to suffer.

* * * * *

When Tom set out from his native village to go to New York and seek employment, he left behind him a dearly-loved mother and a sister and brother, both younger than himself.

The family was very poor, and Tom was its only support, the brother being a cripple, the sister delicate in health, and the mother herself far from strong.

The father had died about three years before the opening of our story, leaving behind a small legacy of debt. He had failed in business through no fault of his own, and the shock hastened his death.

Since that time Tom had contrived to keep starvation away from the home by working steadily in a mill at Wendell Depot, some three miles from Irving.

Many a morning, before daylight, had he trudged along that hilly road through a blinding snowstorm, or a dense fog, to put in the day's work that would buy bread for the next, and supply, perhaps, a pittance toward the liquidation of his late father's debts, responsibility for which he had voluntarily assumed.

It was a hard struggle for a youth of his age, but he bore it bravely and manfully, for the sake of the dear ones at home. Night after night he came home to them with an outward show of cheerfulness when his heart was heavy and sore.

It was such a struggle as would sap the very springs of vitality in an ordinary youth.

At last one day there came a heavy blow. The Wendell Mills were burned to the ground and Tom was deprived of his only source of income.

He tried hard to get work elsewhere in the neighborhood, but failed. Times were hard and work was scarce. A presidential election was in sight, and most employers of labor were, to use the common expression, "shortening sail," that is, limiting the number of their hands.

There was clearly nothing for Tom to do around home.

He was vaguely conscious of having abilities of a high order—indeed, his friends freely credited him with possessing them—but the vicinity of Irving was not the place for a youth of that kind, for half of the laborers there were unemployed.

To get work he must go away from home, and, what was terribly hard to bear, he must leave behind him the loved ones dependent upon him. It would be madness to think of taking them with him, when he had no situation in view, and he could not take them if he wanted to. Poor fellow! He had barely enough to take himself, after he had left with them what might support them for a couple of weeks.

The leave-taking was a sad one. It almost unmanned him. It would have brought tears from the hardest heart. His gentle mother and his sister Nell sobbed with grief, while his crippled brother Dick was unable to speak.

A hurried kiss and warm clasp given to each, and Tom literally tore himself away.

Five minutes later he was on the train and making for the great metropolis.

Most rural people foolishly think that in the big cities lucrative employment can be had for the asking.

Tom partly shared in this delusion, for he had all the vitality and hope that belongs to youth, and misfortune had not yet tried to crush it out of him. But he had a stronger reason for going to New York.

About a year before an uncle of his, who had long lived in the city, wrote him, offering to procure him a good situation if he would go down there.

Tom, in his then desperate circumstances, hated to leave a certainty for an uncertainty, and besides, his mother was very sick.

He now thought of this uncle and determined to hunt him up. He had carefully preserved his address.

He got to New York, and—irony of fate!—found that his uncle had moved away to some town in Nebraska.

We know how for weeks Tom tramped the streets of the big city trying to get work that would enable him to send some money home to his mother.

We know how he met discouragement after discouragement, and failure after failure.

He had promised his mother to write to her every second day, and up to the present he had done so. While his letters were not untruthful, they told little of his sufferings. He could not bear to send anything but cheerful news home.

His meeting with "Mr. Hardy" was the first apparent stroke of luck, the first gleam of sunshine peeping through the dark cloud of misfortune. It came at a time when, manly and strong as he was, he was on the verge of despair.

It might have been better if that meeting had not taken place. It had got him into his present embarrassing and dangerous position. It was the prime cause of many troubles to follow.

CHAPTER VI.

So it was thoughts of home, of mother, brother and sister, that filled Tom's mind and kept him awake the whole of his first long night's imprisonment.

His mother was no doubt needing help at this very hour, and he was immured in a place where it was impossible to do more than think of her. Perhaps she and Dick, and Nell were needing bread. Perhaps—

The poor fellow was almost frantic in his grief. Through the eyes of affection he saw his family sufferings at home. He saw the sad, sweet-faced mother praying for his safety and success, his sister Nell, with her deep-blue eyes filled with tears, and Dick, the cripple, who had the spirit, but not the strength, of a man, trying to console them—trying to fill Tom's place as their protector.

Thus passed the night and another day and night, the only breaks to the dreary monotony being the eating of his meals.

These were periodically shoved into the room by Mac or Jim, who closed the door as quickly as Tom seized the basket containing them.

He was allowed a lamp while he was eating. The moment he was done it was taken away.

Some time during the next day he was lying on the sofa, thinking the same old thoughts and hopelessly plotting a means of escape, when, on a sudden, a streak of daylight broke into the darkness around him.

He sat up with a start.

He looked toward the door, expecting to find it open, but that part of the room was still in darkness.

The light came from a little hole in the wall opposite him. It was at a height of about ten feet from the floor.

There was a little window, consisting of a single pane of glass less than a foot square, which was usually covered with a little door that opened from the outside.

This door was now open.

While Tom was looking at it, the window opened and a head appeared at the hole. Presently a voice called softly:

"Harry!"

Tom did not speak, but he watched the face till it was drawn a foot or so back from the window, where the light shone on it. He saw the face of a woman who was most beautiful. Her lovely head was adorned with a wealth of blonde hair.

He leaped to his feet in astonishment. The woman was she whom he had seen in Central Park.

"Harry!" she called again, and then hurriedly closed the window, as if she feared being discovered.

Tom sat down on the sofa and rested his head on his hands.

"It's the same woman," he said. "She calls me Harry. What can it mean?"

The new revelation only deepened the mystery surrounding him. It did not take him two seconds to realize that.

Before it had seemed possible that the different adventures he had gone through had no relationship to one another; but now he saw there was unity and continuity in it all.

His captors and the lady were in the same house, and it was her message (the simple words: "Oh, excuse me!") he had carried to his employer, Mr. Hardy. Therefore, there was a connection of some kind between Hardy, the lady, Mac and Jim.

What was it?

Were they all in a plot together? Or was Hardy the object of their plot? It was hard to tell.

The window opened again and the face appeared.

"Harry!"

Three times the woman called this name in a low voice, in which there was an earnest pleading. Three times she raised a lamp to the window, trying to dissipate the darkness of the room.

But, though she turned the lamp to every side, it failed to light up the corner in which Tom stationed himself, to avoid being seen.

He knew that the woman mistook him for some one else, and he thought his prospects would be bettered if he did not undeceive her.

It did not occur to him that the men had also made a mistake.

From the time they had shown an exact knowledge of the directions his employer had given him he assumed he was the man they wanted.

He had not thought it possible that there might be two messengers going to the same lonely place about the same time.

"Oh, Harry, speak if you are alive—Harry!"

Tom had not intended to speak, but he found it hard to leave the woman in such apparent anxiety.

He made up his mind to answer her in some way, so as to relieve her. But he would take care to keep in the dark corner and to change his voice by affecting a heavy cold.

"What!" he grunted.

The sound was like that of a man speaking from the bottom of a well.

He waited in breathless suspense to see what the effect would be. He had a vague idea that his danger would be increased if she discovered he was not the individual she supposed.

CHAPTER VII.

Several seconds passed.

At last Tom was relieved from his anxiety by hearing the woman exclaim:

"Oh, Harry, you are really there? Forgive me. I am sorry."

Immediately there flashed upon his mind the thought that he might make this woman useful to him. Through her he might be able to effect his escape.

She evidently had some sympathy for the individual known as Harry (whoever that might be). He would play upon that sympathy as long as he could, which meant for as long a time as he could conceal his identity from her.

He must not let her see him. He must not let her get even a glance at his face. He must keep up the assumed voice with which he had begun. It had so far been satisfactory.

"Harry, speak to me."

"What do you want?" was the guttural reply.

"You are angry, Harry, aren't you?"

"I should say so."

"Well, I can hardly blame you, for I am the cause of your being here, though I didn't mean it. Indeed I didn't. Believe me, I did not understand what they meant till they told me you were here. You'll forgive me, Harry, won't you?"

There was considerable distress in the tone of her voice, though it did not go so far as to indicate love for "Harry."

He did not know what reply to make. He did not know whether he could draw her out better by pretending to be angry or by expressing forgiveness.

He decided on the former course as the best way to avoid saying too much, thus betraying himself.

He kept quiet, and she continued to plead for forgiveness, saying she had been an innocent party to his capture. She had had no idea whatever that any harm was intended toward him.

"All right, I'll forgive you," said Tom, seeing she would talk about nothing else till that point was settled.

"Oh, I'm so glad, Harry! I did not want you to think I would do such a thing. They made me do it."

"Do what?"

"Oh, I must go. They might find me here."

"What would they do?"

"Those men? They are capable of doing anything. They might kill me if they got angry."

"Who are—"

Tom was going to ask who the men were, but that, perhaps, would betray his ignorance of who the girl herself was. It might reveal to her the fact that he was not "Harry."

He had to exercise great care.

"Don't go yet," he whispered. "Don't go yet. I want you to tell me why they brought me here?"

"Oh, I can't do that."

"Why?"

"Oh, don't ask me. It was not my doing. They forced me to—"

"What?"

"I can't tell you, Harry."

"Do you know what they mean to do?"

"I didn't then."

"But now?"

"Oh, I must go. I am afraid they will find me here."

"No, no! stay."

"I can't. I hear them coming."

"Will you come back?"

"I dare not to-day."

"Why?"

"They will be home. To-morrow—"

"Yes. What?"

"They will be away."

"And you'll come?"

"Yes, Harry, I'll come if they go."

She disappeared, and the window closed. Tom had the darkness and his own sad thoughts as companions once more.

It almost distracted him to think of his mother, whose circumstances had become so desperate. He might be kept imprisoned here for days, and even weeks; and what would she do?

Perhaps at this moment she was expecting help from him. She was certainly expecting a letter.

He had about twenty dollars in his pocket. Why had he not mailed it to her? She would have received it before this, and have been relieved from immediate want.

He had intended to send her a post office order, but had delayed too long; he should have done it before he went to Jersey City.

"Oh, if he could only send it now! If he could only break out of his prison for one hour. He would regard it as a favor from Heaven to be able to send it with a short, encouraging letter.

"Poor Dick and Nell!" he groaned; "poor mother! Starving, perhaps. They must have been almost in a destitute condition three weeks ago; and I haven't sent them a dollar since."

In his agony of mind Tom did what it is ever safe to do under such distressing circumstances.

He prayed fervently.

The long day passed.

About ten o'clock that night the door opened and in walked Mac.

He carried a lamp that lit up his dark, swarthy face, showing features marked by a career of wildness. Resolution was the dominant note of his character. It showed in his countenance, in his walk, in his manner and in his speech.

"Well, how are you getting on, youngster?" he asked, as he set the lamp on the washstand and took a seat on the sofa. "Do you think you could enjoy this kind of life very long? Not so nice as playing billiards and pool, is it?"

Tom was sitting on the floor. He looked at the speaker and read his character in a glance. He saw that he had to deal with a man who, whatever good points he might have, could be relentless when it came to carrying out anything that would serve his own interests.

There was, under the circumstances, only one way to deal with such a man, and that was to employ the arts of cunning.

"What's your object in keeping me here?" asked Tom.

"Don't be so inquisitive, my dear Harry."

Tom could now have told him he had made a mistake and captured the wrong man, but he doubted if it would do him much good.

It certainly would not bring about his release. To release him would expose him.

Besides, if he disclosed his identity he would not be able to learn the secret of the plot, and already he had his heart set on that.

There might be some innocent victims to warn, perhaps even a life to save.

He resolved to keep up the deception they had brought on themselves.

But he made a blunder at the outset.

"Mac," said he, quite familiarly, "this sort of work won't do. I——"

He stopped when he saw the effect of his speech.

The man leaped to his feet in amazement; his face became livid with rage.

"Where did you get my name?" he asked. "How did you——"

He paused and stared steadily at Tom's face, his steely eyes seeming to pierce to the depths of the boy's soul.

He showed fear as well as bewilderment, and this told Tom that the real Harry was supposed to know nothing about these men.

"How did you know me?" he cried. "Speak; I must know!"

"I'll not tell you," said Tom, feeling he had an advantage, and determining to keep it. "I know more about you than you think."

Fatal words.

The man's face fairly blazed with passion. With a lightning-like movement of his arm, he drew a pistol from his pocket and leveled it at Tom's face.

CHAPTER VIII.

"Speak, you young scoundrel, or I'll blow your whole head off!"

The gleaming barrel of the pistol pointed directly in his face; the menacing words, uttered in thunderous tones, and the steely, wicked eyes flashing with anger, gave Tom the worst shock he had ever experienced in his life.

His heart, for the moment, stopped beating, cold shivers ran up and down his back, and his tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth.

He could not have spoken a word if he had got a fortune. He seemed paralyzed.

It was almost a miracle that the man did not instantly pull the trigger, as his temper had got quite beyond his control. And such a temper! Tom had never seen anything like it, though he had seen a mad bull that got loose at a fair in Irving, and he had seen a mad dog foaming at the mouth, that had to be shot.

For fully a minute the two stood looking each other in the eyes.

The man delayed carrying out his threat through the force of some motive known only to himself. Tom stood motionless, simply because he dared not move. He was too horrified to move.

It was well for him it was so. Had he tried to dodge or crouch back he would have been shot down like a dog. Nay, had he stirred his head, or moved a finger, he would have invited the full charge of the pistol in his face, and that in spite of the man's desire not to kill him.

At last the pistol was lowered. Tom, the terrible tension being relaxed, felt so weak that he staggered over to the sofa and sat down on it.

"It was well for you you didn't provoke me further, young

man," said his captor. "I just want to warn you that Mackenzie McLeod's temper is an ugly one, and he can't always control it."

"What have you got against me, anyway?" asked Tom. "What have I done to you?"

"Stand up!"

Tom obeyed. There was no resisting a command uttered in such a tone, especially when backed up by a temper so ungovernable, and the possession of a pistol kept at full cock.

But, while he obeyed, he tried to hide his fear. He tried to show his captor he was anxious not to provoke him further, and that, so far as he was concerned, he had no enmity, or even any ill feeling, except what might naturally arise through a sense of having been unjustly dealt with.

His demeanor seemed to have an ameliorating effect on McLeod, who lowered the trigger and pocketed the pistol.

"Let us understand each other now," said the latter, in a voice well under control, but still stern and wrathful. "I want to have this point settled."

"So do I," said Tom. "I am just as anxious as you to come to an understanding."

"Well, begin."

"Begin? How?"

"I say begin!"

"I know you do, but——"

"Are you going to provoke me again?"

"Not if I can help it."

"Why don't you speak, then?"

"I don't know what to say. I supposed you would explain first."

Out came the pistol again. The man's face grew almost purple.

"Are you going to answer me?" he cried.

"Yes."

"Go ahead, then, and be quick about it, or by thunder I'll——"

"What do you want me to tell you?"

"Tell me how you knew my name. You called me 'Mac' just now. How did you come to know it?"

There was a pause, during which the two could hear the beating of their hearts.

During that pause there came to Tom's mind—by divination or inspiration, or what you will—an idea that instantly developed into a firm conviction; and that idea, or rather the action it led to, was the turning point in his life. The idea took this form:

"Mackenzie McLeod believes me to be 'Harry'; if he now finds out his mistake he will kill me on the spot!"

This conclusion was correct. The only thing that had so far saved him was McLeod's desire not to make way with "Harry" just yet.

Tom saw that self-interest was the motive power that ruled Mackenzie McLeod, and that it alone could check his furious temper.

"One moment, now," he said, speaking as calmly as he could. "Let us not get in a rage. I don't want to provoke you, and I'm quite——"

"Shut up!"

"All right."

"Speak."

"How can I do both?"

"You know what I want."

"What?"

"An explanation."

"I'm willing to give it."

"Then do so. I want no long string of talk. How did you know my name?"

"Mackenzie McLeod?"

"Yes."

"Mentioned it yourself."

"You lie! You called me Mac before I—— By——"

"Hold on."

Tom saw that he had to yield a supposed advantage. He had imagined it would be a benefit to him if his captors thought he was in possession of some knowledge of them.

But he was determined to surrender his advantage as sparingly as possible, to play upon words, to equivocate, quibble and do anything but actually lie.

"Mr. McLeod," he said, "I can't tell you exactly when I first learned the names of you and Jim"—this was perfectly true; he did not know whether it was under the tree, in the boat or in the carriage—"but I will say this, that up to the time you captured me, I never knew anything particularly bad of either of you."

"Look here; drop that."

"Drop what?"

"That balderdash. Speak definitely, or I'll kill you. I feel like killing you anyhow."

Tom knew different. He believed that so long as he could make believe he was Harry he was safe, unless there was another explosion of temper.

"I don't know much about you at all."

"What do you know?"

"I'll frighten you a bit now," thought Tom; aloud he said: "I know you have some wicked plot on hand, and that——"

This was a terrible blunder.

In an instant McLeod sprang upon him and seized him by the throat.

"You young whippersnapper!" he cried. "I'll give you such a thrashing as you'll remember. I'll tear——"

The two fell to the floor and rolled over each other.

Powerful as McLeod was, he did not succeed in carrying out his threat. His impetuosity worked against him. He was so bent on thrashing Tom that he forgot the pistol, which fell to the floor and lay there.

It maddened him to see the youth making so stubborn a resistance. Letting go his throat, he shoved him back from him, intending to strike him with his fist, but Tom leaped quickly to his feet and got out of the way.

McLeod made after him. Tom dodged and got behind him. The pistol was within his reach. He snatched it up, cocked it, and leveled it at his captor.

"The scene is changed, McLeod," he said.

He smiled to let him know he did not want to shoot.

"Don't dare point that weapon at me."

"You pointed it at me, didn't you?"

"Drop it."

"Come off."

McLeod began to approach, though the barrel was pointed directly at him. On his face was an expression of baffled rage truly horrible to see. He had now got to hate his antagonist.

"Stand back," said Tom, who was the more frightened of the two; "I'll have to shoot if you come nearer."

"Shoot away," replied the death-defying ruffian, and he kept advancing.

Tom, with the pistol still leveled, began to step backward and to one side, thus making a circle around the room.

His intention was to reach the door, and while keeping his man covered, try to open it.

His ultimate aim was to get outside and lock Mac in.

McLeod, like a tiger ready to spring, kept following him and making a smaller circle.

He was becoming calmer every moment, but his calmness was even more terrible than his rage, as it showed suppressed but concentrated passion. His eyes glared like those of a beast.

Tom got near the door, and immediately saw that he would have to pass it without any attempt to open it, or else discharge the pistol at his adversary, who was about to make a bound upon him.

He chose the latter, and was bending his finger to pull the trigger when he was seized from behind and the pistol was wrenched from his hand.

He fell to the floor just as the weapon was discharged, and the bullet struck the ceiling.

CHAPTER IX.

It was Jim McLeod that had saved his brother's life. He had entered the door unseen by Tom at the very moment the latter had gained the pistol.

He had concealed himself behind the washstand till Tom passed him, and then noiselessly followed him, keeping behind him.

Thus the three men had been marching around in concentric circles, Tom between the other two.

Mackenzie had seen his brother, and all his actions had been so timed as to enable the latter to advance on Tom without being seen or heard. He had kept Tom's attention occupied.

"Having a fight, were you?" said Jim.

"Yes, I'll kill the young——"

"Stand back, Mac. Try and cool off a bit. Young Macdonald is worth more alive than dead. I hope you know that?"

This let Tom know that he was supposed to be Harry Macdonald—a name he had never heard in his life before.

"And you, Macdonald," continued Jim, "you ought to know better than make Mac mad. It's a wonder he didn't finish you."

"I wasn't trying to make him mad," said Tom. "A man will naturally endeavor to save his life."

"That's so—— Keep back, Mac. You see, he apologizes. Sit down and let's talk business with the youngster."

Jim McLeod seemed to have considerable influence in softening his brother, though it was plain to see the latter was the man whose will generally prevailed.

The two sat on the sofa and conversed in whispers.

Tom, seated on the floor, could not catch a word, but he noticed that both talked excitedly.

Jim was evidently imparting important news to Mac.

At the end of a couple of minutes Mac arose and was about to hurry out of the room, when Jim caught the sleeve of his coat and pulled him back.

The conversation was resumed.

Tom heard two words: "Orange peel" and "Hardy," and no two words could have caught his attention more quickly. They started him on a train of thought that would have led to many useless conjectures, had not Jim suddenly interrupted with:

"Look here, Macdonald; my brother wants to know how you got our names? You had better tell us."

Tom had come to the same conclusion. He informed them that while he was in the wagon he heard them addressing each other by these names.

"Did you overhear anything else?" asked Mac, anxiously.

"Nothing of importance," replied Tom. "All I heard gave me but a knowledge of your names and an impression you had a plot or scheme of some kind on foot."

"And so we have. Did you ever see either of us before?" said Jim.

"Never."

"You have no idea who we are?"

"No."

"No idea of our scheme?"

"None whatever."

"Well, now that you know so much, we may as well tell you that we want you to help us."

"In what way?"

"Oh, you'll see that later on."

"And if I refuse to help?"

"You'll get your head knocked off!"

It was Mackenzie that spoke the last sentence. He would have struck at Tom but for his brother, who laughed as he interfered, and said:

"Pshaw! Mac, don't make a fool of yourself. We can force the young duffer to obey our will. Look here, Macdonald," he continued, "I've saved your life as well as my brother's, but I'm not going to continue saving you if you remain stubborn—at least, not without a salary. We have something for you to do. When the time comes we expect you to do it."

"And we won't put up with any hesitation, either," added Mac, with a threatening look. "The time will come when we will issue a certain order. Take care that you obey it at once!"

"I may not know how to do it," said Tom, innocently, fishing for information.

"Oh, you'll know!" returned Jim, laughing. "It's the easiest work imaginable. You may like it, too," he added, with a glance at Mac—"wouldn't wonder if you'd enjoy it immensely."

"Is it anything?"

"Shut up!" growled Mac.

Tom said no more. He saw that asking questions was only inviting trouble. He was no safer in the presence of the two men than in Mac's alone, for Jim, though he was now mollifying his brother, was a no less dangerous man. He could simply control his temper better. He was just as ready for wicked deeds.

They spoke once again before they left the room.

"Macdonald," said Jim, "be in readiness for our orders. We're likely to set the thing going any hour."

"And say your prayers if you don't intend to obey," said Mac, who, when he got outside, said to his brother:

"I started in to scare the young duffer, and his coolness so tantalized me that I came near finishing him."

"And spoiling everything," said Jim.

It is unnecessary to describe the feelings of Tom Walcott, or tell how he passed the next six hours.

Apart from the worry concerning his family—worry that would certainly kill him if no relief came—he had before him the horrible prospect of being drawn, by force, into some dark, criminal plot, of losing his reputation, his honor and his freedom.

He was awakened from a light sleep by hearing a shriek.

It seemed to come from over his head, to the right.

He got up and lit the lamp which Mackenzie McLeod had left on the washstand. He saw that the small window was on the side whence the sound came.

CHAPTER X.

He moved the washstand over under the window. He blew out the lamp and set it on the floor.

He climbed upon the washstand, and at about the height of his head, touched the window.

He pulled it toward him and it opened easily.

Feeling around with his hands in the embrasure, he touched the door that covered it.

It did not yield to a gentle shove, but when he shoved hard it

flew open, and something—probably the catch that fastened it—dropped to the floor on the other side, and made a rattling noise. Before him he saw light—lamplight—and the ceiling of another room.

At the same time he heard a sound as of some one moving.

Catching his hands on the edge of the embrasure, and allowing his head to go into it, he pulled himself a few inches higher up and tried to look down into the other room.

He did not succeed very well, as the embrasure was fully fifteen inches deep, and on the farther side the hole was less than a foot square. Besides, from the awkwardness of his position he could not hold himself up any length of time.

But he got a glimpse of a portion of the contiguous apartment. It had the appearance of a kitchen or a dining-room.

He saw a young girl reclining half asleep in a chair. At least, she had been asleep. At the very moment his eyes fell upon her she gave a start and sat upright.

Tom pulled himself up again to take another look, but this time he did not see the girl. The chair was empty.

He lowered himself till his feet touched the washstand, and this left his head just as high as the hole, but in a place where he could see no more than a part of the ceiling of the other room.

While he was standing in this position he got a sudden shock.

A face appeared at the other side of the hole. It was within fifteen inches of his own.

With the darkness on his side and the light on the other, he had the advantage. He was able to recognize the girl, while she could not see him.

"Harry," she whispered.

"What?"

She gave a start when she found he was so close to her.

"I was dreaming of you, and I shrieked out with fright, because I dreamed I had caused your death."

"I heard the shriek," said Tom, "and that's why I climbed up here."

"You're in danger, Harry. They have not gone away yet."

"When do they go?"

"Not till evening."

"Will they be gone long?"

"Till to-morrow, they say."

"Could you help me to escape?"

"Oh, I dare not! Both of our lives would be put in danger."

"Well, look here. I am in terrible trouble over a duty I have to perform—a promise I have to keep."

He was thinking of the letter he wished to send his mother; he longed for the power to remit her the few dollars he had in his pocket. They might save her, and Dick and Nell from starvation.

"Is that so, Harry?"

"Yes. If I could get out of here for three hours, so that I could visit one place and write and mail a letter, it would lift a terrible load off my mind. If I could do that I would be content to be a prisoner for a week to come. With this duty unfulfilled I am frenzied—I am——"

"I wish I could help you, Harry, but you must not ask me to aid your escape. It's impossible."

"Couldn't you let me out for a time if I promised to come back?"

"Oh!"

"I'd stay no longer than was necessary to perform the duty I speak of."

"I'll think it over, Harry, and if—— Hark! I hear a foot-step. Go down, quick; I'll call you when they're gone."

The door quickly closed and Tom closed the window.

Encouraged to a great degree, he hastily descended and moved the stand back to its place.

About dusk of the evening of the same day the window opened and the girl's voice called:

"Harry."

"Yes," said Tom.

"I have thought that matter over, and I'll grant your request if you'll pledge yourself on your honor to do one thing."

Tom's heart leaped for very joy. There was at least a possibility of aiding his mother.

"What is it?" he asked anxiously.

"To let me accompany you, and when you have your letter written, to come back with me."

"I will do so."

"And you'll obey me in all things?"

"Yes."

Five minutes afterward the door of his cell opened and a voice whispered:

"Come."

He groped his way along the wall and reached the door. It was open.

He was so full of gladness, and yet so full of fear that some obstruction would turn up, that he fairly trembled.

"Be careful, Harry," she whispered, almost in his ear. "There are two other people in the house who might hear the slightest noise. 'Give me your hand and step softly.'"

Having locked the door of his prison, she put the key in her pocket, and seizing his hand, led him down a hall and up a short flight of steps.

It was so dark that he could not see her. But for the soft, warm pressure of her hand he could have believed himself alone and in a dream.

When they got to the landing at the head of the stairs she stopped, and taking hold of his other hand, said:

"I am doing a great deal for you, Harry."

"I appreciate it."

"Because I rely on your word to come back with me."

"Have no fear."

"I am running a terrible risk. I believe they would kill me if they found it out. They'd certainly kill you."

"I'll come back with you."

"Must you really go?"

"Yes. I must send a letter. I must perform a duty—write to my mother—"

"Why, your mother is dead, Harry."

"What am I saying? I'm excited. I assure you I have a sacred duty to perform. Oh, help me!"

"I will, but—"

"What?"

"Answer me one question."

"What is it?"

"Where did you go so suddenly when you left me?"

"When?"

"The last night we were together. Answer me that first."

Tom was in a terrible dilemma. He knew not what to say.

CHAPTER XI.

There was a long pause. Tom decided on a bold course.

"I won't tell you now," he said.

"You're angry with me, Harry?"

"No."

"You appear cold. You never called me 'Flora' once."

So her name was Flora.

Tom was thankful for the intense darkness that surrounded them. Only a spark of light coming through the keyhole of a door in front of them could be seen.

Her words showed him that he had been right in concluding that his only hope of escape lay in his being mistaken for Harry Macdonald.

The men, apparently, did not know the real Harry Macdonald by sight. The girl evidently did know him, and was on quite friendly terms with him. Believing Tom to be Harry, she upbraided him for his coldness.

Having his liberty to gain, his life to save, and his destitute family to think of, Tom Walcott was readily disposed to learn a couple of lessons from what he had just heard.

"Flora," he said, "you cannot expect me to be in particularly good-humor after the treatment I have received."

"But you shouldn't be angry with me, Harry. It wasn't I that—"

"I'm not angry with you."

"Do you mean it?"

"I do, Flora. There, that will prove it," and in self-defense—as he supposed—he kissed her.

"How dare you, Harry Macdonald?" she cried aloud in anger.

Tom nearly dropped through the floor with fright and mortification. He saw he had gone too far. He had compromised with his chivalry and manliness to no purpose.

"Oh, forgive me," he pleaded; "I did not know that—"

His danger was greater than ever, for his coolness having fled, he was likely to betray himself.

Fortunately her compassion was greater than her anger, and she listened to his pleading; but she gave him a start by saying:

"What is the matter with your voice, Harry? It seems so changed."

"Oh, I have a terrible cold. I swallowed some—I—I— Let us go on, Flora."

"Wait a moment. I must blindfold you."

"What for?"

"So that you cannot see the surroundings. You promised to obey."

"I will."

"Where do you want to go?"

"To Fourth Street, New York."

"Why, that's only—"

"What?"

"I will take you there. Hold up your head till I tie this. I have learned to trust your word, and I know you'll make no attempt to see, or to escape."

"Thanks!"

In his heart Tom was delighted to be blindfolded. It would prevent the girl seeing his face. It would, perhaps, enable him to conceal his identity.

"The luckiest thing that his happened," he thought, as she tied a heavy silk handkerchief about his eyes.

She opened the door before her and led him into a well-lighted room. She asked him to sit down a moment and wait.

He trembled with a fear that now, seeing his figure and the probable difference in size between him and Macdonald, she would detect his imposture.

As he seated himself, the handkerchief, which had been loosely tied, fell from his face and lay on his shoulder.

It was not his fault, but he acted as if it was.

He made haste to re-tie it, ostensibly to show he wished to keep his word, really that she might not see his face.

She did not notice what happened at all. She was putting on her cloak and hat before a large mirror, and though her face was

well turned toward Tom, her attention was not taken away from her own reflection.

And such a reflection.

Tom knew what it was like, for, while he was rearranging the bandage, he got a good view of her.

Perhaps he lingered over the operation of tying a little. No one could blame him if he did, for the sight before him was one on which the eye might well delight to linger.

She was a beautiful young woman. He was certain he had never seen one so lovely, so stately, so grand. She was more beautiful than his sister Nell, whom, though belonging to the fragile type, he had long regarded as the beau ideal of feminine loveliness. Her magnificent face, with its creamlike complexion, the speaking brown eyes, the glorious profusion of blonde hair, and the superb figure, would have made her the envy of titled ladies.

Before she turned around Tom had blindfolded himself. He had taken care to cover his whole face with the handkerchief.

She procured him a hat, and, again taking his hand, led him out of the house.

"Softly," she whispered. "Let us not speak at all for the present. Mind the steps."

Tom counted seven steps in the descent to the ground. He was sure they were stone. He ran his disengaged hand along the balustrade, and he noticed, or fancied he noticed, one peculiarity.

There was the figure of a lion, or some such animal, couchant, and its tail was curled up over its back. One of its ears was broken off, and there was a hole in the place where that organ ought to be.

He drew a lead pencil from his pocket, intending to make a mark on the balustrade, but he had not time, as the girl turned toward him; and, somehow, in the excitement of the moment, he dropped the lead pencil in the hole left by the missing ear of the animal.

Had he been asked why he tried to make a mark on the balustrade he could hardly have answered. He scarcely knew what he was thinking of.

He only knew that he was delighted with the prospect of being able to communicate with his dear mother, and he felt most grateful to the lovely girl who, at risk to herself—for she had said so—was aiding him and—trusting him.

He meant to keep his word. He was determined to come back with her. He had never broken his word yet, and he would not begin by deceiving a woman.

She led him along a short, graveled path. She asked him to stoop and bow his head for a yard or two, and shortly afterward she put his hand on the side of a carriage and asked him to enter.

She had to wait a few moments for the driver. Then she got in and sat beside Tom; the door was closed, and almost immediately the carriage started.

It turned to the left and got on ground that was somewhat rough. In less than a minute it turned again to the left and shortly afterward to the right, and for the next half hour the turns were so frequent that Tom was obliged to give up all attempts to follow the course in his mind.

He was partly prevented by his companion, who at first was inclined to keep quiet, but who, as they proceeded, showed a disposition to become talkative.

"I am sorry for what has occurred, Harry," said she. "I assure you I was completely deceived. I supposed that you and I were to —"

"What?"

"Oh, I forgot myself. I can't tell."

"But you should—especially since I have pledged myself to return with you. Do you know the plot of these men?"

"No. What plot? I only know that I am to—"

"What?"

"Oh, there I am again. I am pledged to secrecy, Harry."

"Who are these men?"

"Why, what a strange question. You know why they are. Don't you remember me telling you about them?"

"No. What did you say?"

"Why, I spoke of them to you a dozen times. Don't you mind I pointed them out to you in the theatre and told you—"

"What?"

"Oh, Harry, it is so hard to keep a secret from you."

"You shouldn't."

"I feel I shouldn't, but it will all come right yet."

"What must happen first?"

"Harry, you surprise me. You are changed."

Tom saw his mistake, and instinctively began to arrange the bandage more tightly about his face.

"We are at Madison Square now," she said. "You may take off the bandage till we're coming back."

"Oh, I'd just as soon keep it on."

He had to keep his face concealed, but, availing himself of her permission, fixed the silken bandage so that he could see with one eye without her knowing it.

And what did he see?

Something that he long remembered.

CHAPTER XII.

They were going slowly through Madison Square, when a young man who was passing happened to see a face at the carriage window.

Instantly he dropped his cane and sprang forward to the horses' heads. He stopped the team, and then, calling to the driver to wait, hurried back to the door of the carriage and tried to open it.

It was at this very moment that Tom was arranging the handkerchief so that he could see with one eye without the lady knowing it.

He was just in time to see the face of the stranger, who was a young man of about his own age, with a fine, well-cut face, dark hair and dark eyes.

It was only a glance, but it enabled him to see every feature of the countenance now lit up with some wild excitement.

The driver whipped up his horses, and the stranger was soon left behind, having failed to carry out his intention of opening the carriage door.

The lady did not appear to notice the incident at all. She gave a little shriek of alarm when the horses started up so quickly.

She leaned forward to give the driver a direction, and Tom took advantage of the chance to look out of the little glass window at the back of the carriage.

He saw the young man running behind, trying to overtake them, and then, just as he was drawing his face away from the glass, he saw this same man hailing a cab.

As they crossed Broadway, lighted up with thousands of lamps and thronged with people and vehicles of every description, Tom thought how easy it would be for him to effect his escape altogether if he only chose to break his word. He could tear off the bandage and leap out of the carriage, and the girl could not stop him. She was the only barrier between him and liberty.

What right had she to ask that pledge? What right had she

to bring him back to a prison where he was liable at any time to be killed by the wicked Mac and Jim?

The idea was monstrous. The girl must have a heart as cruel as Nero's to demand such a thing. Did she not know she would be putting his life in great danger? Ah, but she had released him. She had relied upon his word to come back. She was helping him. She had shown some honor.

To Tom, who had seen nothing but mystery for the last five days, this was the greatest mystery of all.

The girl appeared to like Harry Macdonald and feel sorry for his captivity, and yet she wanted him to return to it.

Tom did not forget the little incident that had just happened in the park, but he was quite ignorant of the fact that the stranger was still following them.

"Tell me, Flora," he said, still disguising his voice, "couldn't you do without taking me back with you?"

"Oh, no, Harry. Please do not ask that!" she exclaimed, excitedly. "Please don't break your promise."

"Do you mean I am to go back to that room and be locked in again?"

"Certainly, Harry; just as soon as you have written and posted your important letter. The men must not know you have been out of the room at all. Let me see—it is now nine o'clock. We ought to be back by eleven, at the furthest."

"Are you aware that they are likely to kill me?"

"Oh, I hope not! I trust not. You know you could save yourself by——"

"By what?"

"Oh, I can't tell you!"

"There is a means of escape, then?"

"Oh, yes."

"You mean by obeying them?"

"By doing the one thing they ask."

"I shall not."

"Oh, Harry!"

"What?"

"You intimated once before you would do it."

"Did I?"

"Certainly. You surely don't forget it."

Tom was more and more puzzled. He thought for a moment, and said:

"Flora, what if I don't go back with you?"

The girl burst out crying. She seized his hands and implored him to go back for her sake. Her life, she said, would be in danger if he did not return and submit to being locked up in the room.

"Oh, Harry!" she pleaded, "don't break your word to me. Think how I trusted you. Please come back. Come back and save my life!"

"Would your life really be in danger?"

"Yes. If they find you gone my life would be in danger."

"Then don't you go back, either."

"Worse and worse. We would both die then."

Tom really had no intention of breaking his word. All this talk was to get at the key of the mystery which was every hour becoming darker and deeper.

"Rest easy, Flora," he said, "I'll go back with you."

Her joy was great.

"Oh, thanks, Harry," she said. "You've relieved my mind. Ah, here we are at Washington Square. Yonder is Fourth Street. You had better get out, Harry, and I'll wait for you here. How long will you be?"

"About half an hour."

"Well, I'll drive slowly around the square here. I'll not be any distance from the monument. You'll see the carriage easily."

"Yes. All right."

The carriage stopped.

Tom, in getting out, took the greatest care to keep his face turned from his companion. He alighted on the side on which there was the least light.

He stepped onto the ground and got quickly behind the carriage.

He had succeeded so far in deceiving the girl as to his identity. She still believed him to be Harry Macdonald.

"Good-by, Flora," he whispered.

"Your coming back, Harry?" she asked, in a tone of great anxiety.

"Yes."

"Don't be long. You'll find me here."

Tom hurried under the arch, crossed the street and stepped onto the sidewalk.

He was now safe and free—if he could only break his word!

Was he morally bound to keep such a promise, given under such circumstances? he asked himself.

"Yes, if he would be a gentleman," answered his conscience.

He looked after the carriage. It was in the little park going slowly. The girl was looking out of the window, no doubt trying to see what direction he was taking.

Tom was just about to move away when a carriage pulled up between him and the arch.

He saw a young man step out of it, and he immediately recognized him as the stranger that had acted so strangely and so excitedly in Madison Square, that had stopped the horses and tried to open the carriage door.

This young stranger saw Tom. That was plain from his manner. He scowled and began to approach.

Tom walked off quickly to Fourth Street. Before he had gone a hundred yards he was surprised to see that the stranger was following him, assuming an air of indifference.

Arriving at his boarding house, Tom went inside the porch and remained there watching the stranger, who took up a position across the street.

"What does he want?" thought Tom. "I'll not go inside till I find that out."

Presently the stranger moved away.

Tom, anxious to know who he was, came out of the porch, crossed the street and followed him.

The stranger walked very rapidly, making straight for the park. He never once looked behind.

When he got near the arch he quickened his pace, and, to Tom's astonishment, headed directly for the lady's carriage, which was going slowly past the monument.

Tom, thinking harm might be intended toward the lady, hurried forward to protect her.

Before he could get to her, however, he saw the carriage stop, the door open, and the stranger step into it.

Away flew the carriage with the lady and the stranger.

Soon they were out of sight, and Tom was left in the park alone.

In order not to break his promise, he hung around the vicinity for hours, but the carriage with the lady and the mysterious stranger never came back.

One would have thought Tom's troubles were over.

CHAPTER XIII.

Three months have passed since the events recorded in the last chapter, and great changes have come to some of the personages of our story.

Tom Walcott has brought his mother, brother and sister to New York. They are all living in humble, but fairly comfortable, rooms on First Avenue.

Tom is working steadily now, and deriving from his work enough income to keep the family from want. They are far from being out of debt, but their circumstances are an improvement upon what they were in Irving, especially after the Wendell Mills burned down, and while Tom was tramping the streets of New York looking for work.

The reader will naturally ask how did this desirable change come about. How did Tom make enough to move the family down from Irving? We will explain.

When he went back to his boarding house the night he lost track of the lady, Flora, in Washington Park, he found, to his surprise, that Mrs. Moffatt had moved away, and in her place was another woman named Mrs. Fleming.

He was more surprised when he found that the change was to make no difference to him—that Mrs. Moffatt had made arrangements with her successor by which Tom was to continue as a boarder as long as he liked, and that she had left a letter "to be handed to Mr. Walcott when he comes."

The biggest surprise of all was when he opened this letter.

He found it to contain fifty dollars and the following:

"MY DEAR YOUNG WALCOTT: I was much disappointed that you did not return to me the evening you went to Pleasant Plains, and I cannot understand what has since kept you, for, of course, I know you are too honest to intentionally break your word. Your trip must have been a success, however, as things turned out well. You will find inclosed fifty dollars, which I desire you to accept. I am leaving town for a few days, and when I return I hope to find you still at Mrs. Moffatt's."

There was no signature, no superscription of any kind.

Tom questioned Mrs. Fleming. She knew nothing, she said, about either Mrs. Moffatt or the gentleman.

Next morning he sent thirty dollars home to his mother, and within six hours afterward transacted an important piece of business.

He bought out the business and good will of a bootblack who had a chair and a small newsstand at the corner of a hotel on Third Avenue.

He came across the bargain quite accidentally. He happened to be passing the corner, and heard the bootblack telling a friend that he wished he could sell out, as he had something better in view.

Tom was not above the bootblacking industry. He had never learned to feel the indignity of labor.

He arranged with the hotel man to pay a part of the price for him and accept his written agreement to give him a portion of the profits until the business should be entirely his own.

It was the luckiest stroke of his life. That evening he started for Irving, Massachusetts. He found his mother, Dick and Nell in dire poverty, but still alive and well. The thirty dollars arrived about the same time he did.

He unfolded his scheme to his mother, and got her consent and blessing.

He spent a week in Irving, selling out all the furniture and stuff they did not need, and then he moved the whole family to New York, renting rooms, as has been said, on First Avenue.

He took Dick into the business with him. Dick was to mind

the newsstand, and he himself was to do the more laborious work of shoe-polishing.

The morning they began business their assets amounted to the following:

Newspapers (useless after day of issue).....	\$2.25
Cash on hand	35
Total	\$2.60

The plant, consisting of the newsstand and the chair, with the blacking kit, were still the hotel man's property, Tom having paid but a trifle on them.

Dick, the cripple, proved a capital business man. He sat in his chair and sold his papers and answered questions in a manner that pleased every one with whom he came in contact.

He was delighted with his new occupation. It was easy and pleasant, and it made him proud to think he was no longer idle, that he could aid Tom to support his mother and Nell.

At the end of a week they were four dollars ahead, and at the end of the second week their profits totaled \$13.70.

They were not becoming Vanderbilts, but they were hopeful of getting out of bitter poverty and ultimately out of debt.

Tom's manly, cheerful manner and Dick's courtesy began to attract the attention of gentlemen who passed the corner every day, and, little by little, these men got into the habit of purchasing their morning papers from the cripple, and getting their shoes polished by Tom.

So that the three months that passed since Tom's last adventure had put him on a better footing with the world.

He had the business stand more than half paid for, and the prospects were getting even brighter.

And now to answer a question which the reader has been waiting to ask:

Did Tom Walcott, during these three months, see or hear anything of the people with whom he had been associated in his strange adventures? Did he find out the mystery of the orange peel that he had picked up from under a bench in Central Park? Had he learned the mystery of the mysterious errand that brought him to Pleasant Plains? Had he solved the plot of Mac and Jim?

No.

From the night the carriage had driven off and left him in Washington Park, he had neither seen nor heard anything concerning his employer, his captors, Jim, Mac and Wilson, the girl, Flora, that had accompanied him in the carriage, or the mustached young dandy whom he had met in the restaurant.

The whole thing might have been a dream, so far as proofs were left of these people having existed.

They lived only in Tom's memory, and oftentimes he said to himself:

"Either I dreamed the whole of it, or it is the most mysterious series of events I ever heard of."

He made several trips to Wall Street and the Taylor House, Jersey City, hoping to find some news of his late employer; he visited Mrs. Fleming's boarding house every second day; he watched the papers; he searched and re-searched the city directory; and he walked around many parts of the city looking for a house with a couchant lion in front of it.

All in vain. The mystery was deep and dark and beyond his power to fathom.

He often thought of the girl, Flora, who to the very last had mistaken him for a certain Harry Macdonald, and, as her beauty and gentleness came before him, he wondered if she was really

in the secret of the plot, and how it was she was in the company of villains.

As for finding out who Harry Macdonald was, he gave that up as hopeless, when, having looked at the directory, he saw several pages covered with the name Macdonald. It seemed as if the whole original clan had settled in New York.

One morning, after the first great rush of business was over, the majority of their regular customers having gone to their offices and their work, Tom and Dick, as was their wont, sat down to glance over the papers and discuss some of the chief events of the day.

Dick was behind his counter and had a *New York World* in his hand.

Dick had been reading some time, when he suddenly exclaimed:

"Poor fellow! That's pretty hard."

"What's that, Dick?" asked his brother.

"It's an exciting piece of news in this morning's papers. They're all full of it. It's going to be the sensation of the hour, and, while it will increase our sales for a while, I feel sorry for the poor fellow that——"

"Let us hear it. Who is he?"

• "A young fellow named Harry Macdonald."

"What!"

To Dick's absolute amazement, Tom leaped out of his chair, sprang across the sidewalk, and, reaching over the counter, snatched the paper out of his hand.

"Let me see it!" he cried, and, while his face grew deadly pale and his eyes expanded, he hurriedly read the paragraph that had caught his brother's attention.

CHAPTER XIV.

The newspaper article, which was at that moment being read and discussed by thousands on the streets, read as follows:

"MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

"IS IT A CASE OF FOUL PLAY OR SUICIDE?—COMMODORE MACDONALD'S SON MISSING.

"Young Harry Macdonald, son of Commodore Macdonald, the 'Wall Street King,' has mysteriously disappeared, and grave doubts of his being alive are entertained. It is fully three months since he was last seen by his friends, but it is only within the last few days that the matter excited comments and fears, as his father had been absent from home for some time, and it was supposed that the son might be with him. The father is distracted with grief. He fears that his son has met with foul play. He offers a large reward for information that will lead to his being found."

There was considerably more in the article, but it referred wholly, and in eulogistic terms, to Commodore Macdonald, who was reputed to be a multi-millionaire, and acknowledged to be a gentleman and philanthropist.

Tom Walcott was literally shocked when he read the news. It had a deeper effect upon him, perhaps, than on any one else in New York, outside of the father of the unfortunate young man.

He uttered an exclamation of horror and sat down in his chair, letting his head rest on his hand.

"What's the matter?" asked Dick, in alarm.

"Matter? Oh, Dick, you don't know anything about it. This is awful——"

"What's awful?"

"This news."

"About young Macdonald?"

"Yes, yes! Oh, dear! oh, dear!"

"Why should it excite you, Tom? You don't know the young man, do you?"

"No. Never saw him, to my knowledge."

"Why do you worry over it, then?"

"He's gone. He's been captured. The plot has succeeded. Those infernal scoundrels have——"

"Why, what on earth are you talking about, Tom? I don't understand you. One would think that—— What scoundrels are you referring to?"

"Oh, Dick, don't bother me! There, that's a good fellow. Let me think."

And Tom did think. For upward of a quarter of an hour he beat his brains and tried to remember little details that had before appeared insignificant to him.

Dick watched him, wondering what it all meant.

Tom had not confided any of his late adventures to his family, consequently Dick was wholly unprepared for anything approaching the nature of a mystery. It was hard for Dick to associate secrecy and mystery with the open-hearted, frank brother that he admired as a chivalrous hero.

After a while Tom jumped out of the chair and said:

"Dick, I'm going to leave you for an hour or two. I won't be any longer than I can help. There's a little matter I want to attend to. Get Micky to watch my chair."

Micky Flynn was a boy whom Tom was accustomed to hire quite frequently to assist him when there was a rush of business, or to do all the shining in case he, Tom, had to absent himself any length of time.

For Tom did often absent himself for an hour or so—especially lately, since the business had got pretty well established. On fine days he liked to take his mother and his sister Nell for an outing to Central Park, or for a ride on the cars; and while he was away, Micky, to use his own flowery language, "wielded the brush an' administhered artistic ornamentation."

Micky was a character. He—but we will get better acquainted with him later on.

Tom warned Dick to say nothing about the matter just referred to, and carefully to watch the business.

Then he started off like a man who had settled upon a course of action and was determined to carry it out.

But before he went a dozen yards he stopped.

"Hold on," he muttered to himself. "This may not be the proper step to take, after all. I must think it over a little more."

The idea that had moved him so far was that he should go at once to the chief of police and tell him everything he knew, relating his adventures from the evening he had first met his eccentric employer, Mr. Hardy, up to the night the stranger had stepped ahead of him into "Flora's" carriage.

He—Tom Walcott—was, perhaps, the only human being, outside of the plotters themselves, who had even the faintest idea of what might have become of Harry Macdonald, and he had got this knowledge by inference.

The information he could give the police was most important. In their hands it might soon clear up the mystery; he was morally bound to tell it.

This is the way it appeared to him when he leaped up from the chair.

But a new thought struck him as he stopped at the corner.

Had he a right to tell the police what had happened? Had he not promised his employer to keep secret everything in connection with his mysterious errands to Central Park and Pleasant Plains? And had he not pledged himself to the lady, Flora, to

say nothing about what happened from the time she released him up to the time he parted with her?

He could not go back on his sacredly-pledged word.

He could not, without perjuring himself, relate his story to the police.

He could tell part of it without breaking any promise; he could relate his capture and imprisonment by Mac and Jim; but that would not do any good. Seeing he was keeping back something the authorities would only suspect he had been accessory to the plot.

It was a hard problem for a scrupulously conscientious young fellow to solve. The more he studied it the more clearly it presented two alternatives to him:

He must either tell everything or keep his mouth closed and say nothing.

He decided to do the latter.

"I'll keep my word, no matter what happened," he said; "and, besides, I'll——"

He walked back to the stand again.

"Dick," said he to the bewildered lad, who had been watching him for the last five minutes, "do you think you could run the business yourself for a week or so—with Micky to do the shining?"

"I guess I could, Tom. Why?"

Dick's innocent blue eyes were full of wonder as he watched his brother, who spoke with affected indifference. Tom, not able to meet his gaze, carelessly glanced over the *World*, which he had again picked up.

"Well, I can't just tell you the cause, Dick—at least not yet. I will as soon as I can."

The eyes of the cripple beamed with loving concern for his brother as he said:

"You're not going away, are you, Tom?"

"No; I'll be around here off and on, but I want to be free to stay away a while if necessary. I want to be foot-loose."

"Will you tell mother and Nell?"

"No, no, Dick. They must know nothing."

Just at this moment Tom's eye caught something else in the paper.

He saw a name among those registered at the Astor House, and of all the persons he desired to meet it happened to be the one.

"I have a bit of work to accomplish, Dick," he continued, still toying with the paper, "and if you can get along without me you'll be assisting me."

"Tom."

"What?"

"There's a mystery."

"Well, yes, Dick, there is."

"You'll depend on me keeping quiet if I guess it?"

"Yes."

"You know something about this young Macdonald?"

"I do."

"And you're going to tell the chief?"

"No."

"What then?"

"I'm going to clear up the mystery single-handed."

"Oh, Tom!"

"Honor compels me to do it. My lips are sealed. I must save Harry Macdonald without help."

CHAPTER XV.

Half an hour later Tom walked into the Astor House.

After looking about in the reading-room and smoking-room, he went up to the desk and looked at the hotel register.

Yes, sure enough, there was the name of his late employer, Mr. Hardy, among the late arrivals. He had registered the evening before.

"Strange he did not send me word he had returned," thought Tom. "I was at Mrs. Fleming's this morning. Of course, it may be some other Hardy."

"Well?" said the clerk, looking up with the peculiar interrogative frown which most of the guild acquire.

"I want to see Mr. Hardy, who is staying here. Is he in his room?"

"I think so. Your card?"

Tom wrote his name on a card and the clerk dispatched a bell-boy upstairs with it.

Presently the lad returned, and handing the card to the clerk, whispered to him.

"Well?" said Tom.

"Not in," said the clerk.

Tom wondered why the bell-boy smiled as he took his seat.

Just at this juncture another man stepped up to the desk.

Tom was turning away at the time, but he overheard the words addressed to the clerk:

"Send my card up to Mr. Hardy, please."

He could not help turning around to take a look, and what he saw surprised him.

The clerk dispatched a bell-boy with the stranger's card, despite the fact that he had, but a moment before, said Mr. Hardy was not in.

Was it possible Hardy was refusing Tom an interview? That is what it meant if he was now in his room.

"I'll just watch this thing and see how it turns out," said Tom to himself; and he took a seat a little way off, where he could see all that passed.

Neither the bell-boys nor the clerk noticed him, for such functionaries cannot remain interested in one individual longer than it takes to receive a tip.

The man standing waiting at the desk was well worthy of the study of a physiognomist, and he interested Tom very much.

He was an aristocratic-looking individual, in spite of the fact that his trousers were a little frayed and his coat well worn. He was fully sixty years of age, yet as straight as an arrow and as active in appearance as a man of thirty. He was over six feet in height. His hair and mustache were gray; his eyes were singularly dark and piercing.

There was a certain youthful, jaunty air about him that would have made most people look at him twice.

With his glasses astride his prominent nose, he studied an oil painting on the wall with the air of a *connoisseur* till the clerk said:

"Mr. Hardy is in his room. He will be pleased to see you."

The jaunty old gentleman followed the bell-boy to the elevator, and Tom Walcott sat back in his seat with the feeling of a man who had just got struck with a snow-slide.

"Well, this beats the deuce!" he muttered. "Why should Hardy 'be in' to this man and ignore me? There's some mystery about it."

Tom's temper was rising. He was not the kind of youth that could meekly bear a snub, even from an employer who had hitherto treated him well.

He arose from his seat with a peculiar light flashing in his eyes.

He moved to another part of the room, where he could watch the elevator without being seen.

He had about come to the conclusion his employer was one of the plotters, when he saw the elevator descending.

The door opened, and out stepped several men.

Two of them were together. One was the jaunty old gentleman with the prominent nose, and the other he could not get a good look at.

The two walked out to the street door and stood on the steps talking, with their faces toward the street.

Tom stepped over to the registry desk and spoke to the clerk.

"Who is that man out at the door?" he asked.

"Which of them?"

"The one with his hands in his pockets."

"That's Mr. Hardy."

"Mr. Hardy?"

"Yes."

"Is that the man occupies No. 37?"

"Yes."

Tom went halfway down the hall and sat down to wait till the conversation was through.

Presently the two men shook hands, whispered to each other and separated. The jaunty old man went down into the street.

The other turned to come back up the hall.

Tom Walcott leaped to his feet.

He could scarcely suppress an exclamation of astonishment.

The man before him was the mustached young dandy he had last seen coming out of the room in the Taylor House, Jersey City!

How the mistake had been made was clear in an instant. Tom had been told to inquire for "Mr. Hardy," and this was the man that had been occupying the room where he found his employer. The latter had only been visiting Hardy.

A very natural mistake, and its discovery would have eased Tom's mind considerably for the moment had it not been for what followed.

The dressy young Hardy was sauntering slowly along toward the desk, when suddenly he caught sight of Tom.

Instantly his face became as white as a sheet.

He turned quickly around and made for the elevator, trying to act as if he had just remembered something he had forgotten.

But Tom Walcott was too quick for him; he caught up to him at the elevator door and said:

"Mr. Hardy! One moment, please."

The young dandy turned around and stared with well-feigned surprise.

Tom was compelled to admire the nerve that enabled him to change his countenance so quickly.

"Well?" drawled out Mr. Hardy.

"Don't you remember me?" asked Tom.

"Remember you? No, I never saw you in my life before."

"I met you at the Taylor House, Jersey City, don't you mind?"

"I don't. I'm in a hurry just now, and——"

"I'll not keep you. I simply want to ask you a question."

"Well? Be quick! What is it?"

"What is the name of the gentleman who was in your room the day I called?"

"I have told you I never saw you before."

"Oh, yes, you did; don't you——"

"I say no."

"It was at the Taylor House, about three months ago. I got a note from my employer telling me to inquire for Mr. Hardy. I met you at the door of the room coming out; don't you mind? You went downstairs, and I found my employer in your room."

"Who is your employer?"

"I don't know. That's——"

"Well, I'm sure I don't."

"But——"

"Men nowadays generally know who they work for."

His smile was annoying to Tom, who was so desperately anxious to learn his employer's name, and recognized this as his only chance.

"Mr. Hardy——"

"I must be going. I have an appointment."

"One moment. Try to think. It's of great importance that I should know the name of the man who visited you that day. You were both together. I met you in a restaurant the night before, and you seemed to know——"

"What the deuce are you talking about? Who are you, anyhow?"

"I am Tom Walcott; and I tell you right here you recognized me just now when you saw me."

"I'd advise you to take care. This hotel keeps men who——"

He tried to step into the elevator as he spoke, but Tom cleverly got in front of him, managing to do so in a way that appeared accidental.

The two stood staring at each other for several seconds, each trying to read what was in the other's mind. In that moment there was generated a reciprocal feeling of dislike. In the mind of one it took the form of deadly and implacable hatred; in the honest heart of the other it resolved itself merely into a feeling of aversion.

But aversion was a bad thing to get into the head of Tom Walcott, especially when it was accompanied with a suspicion such as he now entertained. It was sure to stir up what was most dangerous within him—his combativeness.

"Look here, Mr. Hardy," said he, "I want to know that man's name. Now you know it and——"

"I know neither him nor you."

"You do."

"I don't, nor don't want to."

"You're a liar!"

Smash!

The blow struck Tom fairly on the nose, and for a moment he thought the whole top of his head was knocked off.

Mr. Hardy, smiling, calmly stepped onto the elevator.

"So I've run against a scrapper, have I?" muttered Tom Walcott, as he wiped the blood off his face and looked at the empty elevator cage through which Mr. Hardy had just ascended. "I think this chap and myself will have a little fistic argument when we next meet."

Tom's temper was not improved by the humiliation he underwent, and had he been able to get his hands on Mr. Hardy at the moment there would have been some excitement.

At first he thought of ascending the elevator, but his better reason prevented him, and he beat a retreat in the most graceful manner he could.

"So my employer's name is not Hardy," he soliloquized as he gained the street. "That makes the mystery greater. Why should he have kept his name from me?"

Another thought forced itself by degrees into his head. It was that young Hardy must have a deep reason for pretending not to know Tom's employer.

All of a sudden he exclaimed:

"Good gracious! Hardy knows Mac and Jim. Why, they mentioned him, and at the time I thought they were alluding to my employer. This young villain is in the plot, as sure as I live!"

He wheeled around and walked rapidly back toward the Astor House, which he had left only about a quarter of an hour before.

"I'll corner him and make him speak," he thought. "I'll mention the name Harry Macdonald, and see how he takes it. 'If he do bleach,' as Hamlet says, 'I know my cause.'"

He again entered the hotel.

He expected to see the clerk smile at him, but that worthy, though he had witnessed the blow, acted as if he had never seen him. To the question: "Where is Mr. Hardy?" he calmly answered:

"Gone."

"Gone!" exclaimed Tom.

"He left ten minutes ago."

"Where has he gone to?"

"We keep a hotel only, my son."

This was no less a surprise than the one Hardy had already given him, but he regarded it as throwing a great deal more light on the question.

It showed clearly that Hardy was frightened, that there was some strong reason for his getting so quickly out of the way.

Questioning failed to elicit any further information from the impassive clerk. He did not know, he said, what train Mr. Hardy was leaving the city by.

CHAPTER XVI.

Two days later Dick sat down behind the counter of the newsstand to read. It was his favorite way of enjoying himself when he got the chance.

He had an active, restless mind, that delighted to be working, and he loved books. They had lately added to their stock a large number of novels and magazines, and Dick was trying to read as many of them as possible before they were sold.

At that moment two well-dressed men turned off Broadway and started toward Third Avenue.

They kept close together as they walked, and chatted very confidentially.

"Are you sure you'd know him?" said one.

"Positive. Don't let that trouble you."

"It's astonishing he hasn't talked about it."

"Miraculous, if it's true."

"Of course it's true. The papers would be full of it if he had."

"Unless he had confided it only to the detectives."

"Even then it would have raised a row. No, I tell you, we're safe so far; he has held his tongue."

"That's no guarantee for the future," said Jim McLeod, for he it was. "We can't go a step further till we feel safe."

"And we're in danger as long as he's hanging around loose. It's like sitting on the crater of a volcano."

The last speaker was the jaunty old man Tom had seen in the Astor House—Caleb Wilson.

"Well, now, Caleb, suppose we find him to-night?"

"Well?"

"How are we going about it?"

"You leave that to me. Just point him out."

"Remember, he's cunning, and will be suspicious."

"He has never seen me."

"No; but, if you try to persuade him against his will, he'll catch on, and, if he does, the game is up. He's then sure to blab."

"Don't you fear. I'll just bet we have him safe in our clutches before he sleeps to-night."

They came to the corner opposite Dick's stand and stood talking together as any two gentlemen might who had just met. No

one would think of remarking them, for hundreds along the street were doing just what they were doing.

The road was between them and the stand, but they could see Dick's head above the counter.

"That's not him," said Jim.

"Have we made a mistake, then?"

"No. It's the corner of —th Street and Third Avenue."

"Sure about the name?"

"Tom Walcott."

"Well, I'll slip over. You stay here."

At the approach of a customer Dick laid down his book and arose to his feet. He saw before him a nice-looking old gentleman, the kind that, seeing his deformity, usually spoke kindly to him.

"Sorry to trouble you to rise, my lad," said the customer. "I might help myself."

"Oh, don't mind me, sir, thank you. Is it a paper?"

"I think I'll buy some of those novels of yours for my daughter. I see you have some."

"Very well, sir. These are twenty-five cents apiece."

"And the bound ones?"

"Seventy-five, sir."

"A fine book for that price. Let me see now. I want several. My daughter is an invalid and a great reader. Suppose I take all in that pile—seven. That's five dollars and a quarter—"

"Call it five, sir."

"Ah, thank you. I'd take the lot if I could have them delivered to-night to my place. Do you think—"

"Oh, yes, sir. I'll see that they are delivered if you give me your address. My brother will soon—"

"Oh, just so. I forgot you had a brother. Of course he can deliver them when he comes back. Will he be long?"

"He's just gone to supper, sir. The moment he comes back I'll get him to take them to—"

"No. 29 — Street, Long Island City. Just across Thirty-fourth Street Ferry, Hunter's Point."

"That's all right, sir."

"Here are five dollars, my lad, and I insist upon your brother taking this half-dollar for his kindness in delivering them. Be sure he brings them to-night. I am not likely to be home, but my daughter—"

"She will get them, sir. Thank you."

Dick took the address, bade the gentleman good-night, and began to pack up the books.

"A nice man," he said to himself, "a thorough gentleman. Wish we had a few more customers like him."

At this moment the "thorough gentleman" was telling his companion, Jim, how successful he had been.

The two moved away shortly afterward and took an uptown car.

Tom and Micky Flynn, who had been off to supper, returned about the same time. The former was much pleased, and not a little surprised, to learn that his brother had made such an excellent cash sale.

"You're a splendid business man, Dick," he said.

"I promised you'd deliver them to-night, Tom," returned his brother. "He's an awfully nice old man, and I'd like to keep my word with him."

"So you shall, Dick. I'll start this moment. I just feel like a walk."

"He left a half-dollar for your car and ferry fare. You're to deliver them to his daughter, No. 29 — Street, Long Island City."

"Pshaw! that isn't far. Do you want a ramble, Micky?"

Micky was glad to be asked to accompany Tom. The two started off, took an "L" train, crossed the Hunter's Point Ferry and arrived in Long Island City.

About twenty minutes later they stopped before a large brick house that was some little distance back from the street. It had a vine-covered lattice-work in front of the veranda, and running its whole length, and in other respects, it presented an old-fashioned appearance.

"That's the right number," said Micky. "See, it's on the little window."

The little window to which Micky referred was over the front door, and was lighted. All the rest of the house was in darkness and gloom.

"No wonder his daughter's an invalid," said Micky, when he had surveyed the place. "Why don't he get a lamppost in front of the house?"

"This is where he lives, anyhow," said Tom, little dreaming that the name on the package was a fictitious one. "I won't keep you a minute, Micky."

"I'll walk to the corner and wait for you," said his companion.

Tom opened the little iron gate and started up the gravel path toward the house. He noticed that to his right there was a larger gate, from which a carriage drive ran past the side of the house.

There were stone steps down to the basement entrance of the building, and steps up to the veranda, which was about five feet from the ground.

Up these steps Tom went. It was so dark that he had difficulty in finding the door bell. He found it at last and gave it a pull. Each side of this was a dark avenue formed by the house and the covered lattice-work, and he thought it must be a nice place to sit on summer evenings.

Having waited quite a while, he pulled the bell again. He was about to go around to a side door when he fancied he heard steps in the hall inside.

Suddenly the door opened and a tall figure stood before him. Tom could not see his face, as the hall was but dimly lit.

"Good-evening," said Tom; "I was told to leave a parcel here—some books."

"Ah, yes; you are the young man with the books. This is very kind of you. Come in."

"Thank you," replied Tom, "but I'm in something of a hurry—"

"Oh, just a minute," said the man; "I think my daughter can give you another order. Step in."

The tone of the speaker was so nice, and the prospect of further cash business so pleasing, that Tom expressed a willingness to comply.

He could not see the gentleman's face in the semi-darkness, the hall light being behind him, but he noticed he was quite stooped, as if from great age.

The man stepped back to let him enter, and then proceeded ahead of him into a room on the right.

Tom heard the door close behind him, and wondered who closed it. He was sure the gentleman did not.

"Sit down," said the latter; "I was sleeping when you rang and had the lights turned low."

Tom seated himself on a sofa, and, as he did so, some one closed the door leading to the hall—the door through which he had last entered.

He and the gentleman were alone in the semi-dark room.

"This is pleasant weather, sir," said Tom.

"Very pleasant," was the answer. "We need rain. There now, we can see better," he added, as he touched a match to a couple of jets in a chandelier.

The room was lighted up, and Tom saw before him a man no longer stoop-shouldered, but straight as an arrow, and though he was gray-haired, as strong-looking as a young prize-fighter.

A moment later he saw features he had seen before, and he was so amazed and frightened that he could feel a cold shiver going over him. He recognized the jaunty old gentleman he had seen with Hardy in the Astor House.

He came near betraying his surprise and alarm, when it suddenly occurred to him that this man had probably never seen him before and knew not who he was.

He resolved to appear indifferent, and therefore remarked quietly that he would be obliged if the gentleman would not detain him long.

"Certainly," was the ambiguous answer. "There's one of to-day's papers. Just excuse me a moment. I want to look over a catalogue."

The man departed through curtains at the farther end of the room.

Tom looked around him. There was nothing remarkable about the windows, except that they were covered on the outside with closed shutters.

Had it not been for the mysterious shutting of the doors, and the fact that he had seen this man talking to Hardy, he would have had no cause to feel uneasy. But now—he could not help feeling nervous.

He waited fully five minutes, and by that time he was positively frightened. He quite distinctly heard footfalls and hushed voices in some other part of the house.

He was just about to rise from the sofa when the gentleman reappeared.

"Your name is Walcott, isn't it?" he asked, seating himself in a chair between Tom and the door.

"Yes, sir, Tom Walcott."

"How long have you been in business?"

"About three months."

"Have you always lived in New York?"

"Only since I began business."

"Just so. What were you doing immediately before that, may I ask?"

Tom thought it was good policy to be frank and civil. He told the man how he had lived at Irving.

"Ever have any strange adventures in your life?" continued the questioner. "Any narrow escapes?"

Tom laughingly replied that his career had been of a quite commonplace character.

The man's expression changed. His face became stern.

"Young man," he said, "I want you to be frank with me. You have a secret on your mind, and I know it. Explain to me how it is that you have kept quiet about it so long."

"To what secret do you refer, sir?"

"The one that occupies your mind the most."

"Every one has secrets."

"Not such a one as yours."

"You can't expect me to tell you—"

"I can. I must know it, and I must know your reasons for having kept it."

"Are you sure I kept it?"

"Yes."

"What is the secret?"

"Do you want me to tell you?"

"I do."

The man arose, with a stern, set face, and threw open the curtains through which he had just entered.

"Come here," he whispered. "Now look there!"

Tom followed him and looked into the next room.

The same moment his heart nearly ceased beating, for the sight before him made him realize his danger was awful.

CHAPTER XVII.

Seated at a table in the next room, and enjoying pipes and a decanter of liquor, were the two desperate ruffians, Jim and Mackenzie McLeod. They were pretending not to see Tom, and to be holding an animated conversation.

Tom instantly had recalled to his mind, in the most vivid manner, all of the adventures he had gone through since his capture by these men.

The tones of their voices made him feel as if he was back in the prison from which Flora had released him.

He saw that the whole matter of the purchase and delivery of the books was a scheme on the part of the villains to get him in their power. They had made a tool of the innocent Dick to effect their evil purpose.

He, Tom Walcott, was now in the most frightful danger. He was in the hands of men who, he believed, would not scruple to take his life. He had had proof of this when, to carry out their plot, they had captured him in mistake for Harry Macdonald. To save themselves from exposure, they would go even further.

It was a terrible shock to the lad. Brave as he was, he felt himself trembling all over, and a cold sweat broke out on his brow.

The touch of the old man's hand on his shoulder aroused him.

"Well, does this recall to your mind any secret, young man?"

"How do you mean?"

"Have you seen these men before?"

"Yes."

"Thought so. No need to introduce you, then. Come in."

Tom was in a position where he could not refuse to comply. He preceded the wonderfully youthful old man into the room, and the door was closed after them.

Mac and Jim looked up and fixed on him a piercing gaze.

"How do you do?" said the former, showing no surprise. "Sit down. Glad to see you again. We've been lonesome without you."

"What do you mean?" stammered Tom.

"We want to have a talk with you. Tell us how you escaped."

"I'm under a solemn promise to tell that to no one, and I don't intend to."

"Oh, indeed! Who let you out?"

"I won't tell you."

The men exchanged glances, and then Jim McLeod spoke.

"Oh, hang it, Mac, what need we care?" he said. "He held his tongue, and we've got him again, and what more do we want?"

"I'm sorry now I did not reveal all," said Tom.

"Why?" asked Mackenzie McLeod.

"Because you men have either committed a crime, or intend committing one. It was my duty, knowing what I did, to have you apprehended."

"What did we do?"

"You know that best. Where is Commodore Macdonald's son?"

Mackenzie McLeod arose to his feet. His temper was fast rising.

"Sit down," said Jim and Caleb Wilson together.

"I'll not sit down," he cried. "We've got this chump safe in our hands and I'm not going to stand his impudence. He's got to tell what he knows about us."

"I know you're villains," said Tom, angrily, "and I tell you

had better open those doors and let me out quietly, for I left a companion waiting at the gate, and if I'm kept here much longer his suspicion will be aroused."

This shot told.

The men looked at one another in alarm. Jim McLeod and Wilson drew their chairs together and began to whisper. It was plain to see they were frightened.

Mackenzie McLeod drew forth a pistol and commanded Tom to tell who this companion was.

"Give his name," he cried, "or I'll kill you!"

Tom saw his mistake. If he had waited till he was sure Micky must have left his post, he would have had a power to hold over them.

He could have kept them in constant fear of exposure. Now Micky was in danger of being captured, and that meant the death of all hopes. No one else had seen him enter the house.

"What's his name?" repeated Mac, cocking the pistol.

"Micky Flynn," said Tom.

"What does he look like?"

Tom was forced to give a description of the Irish lad.

"Did you bring him with you purposely?"

"No; he came of his own accord."

"Does he know anything about us?"

"No."

The pistol was lowered.

"We've got to secure this lad," said Mac, turning to the others. "He's a menace to our safety. He might wait all night out there and then talk about it."

"Yes," said Caleb Wilson, rising. "We've got to capture him. It won't do to leave any loose fish hanging around."

"Go, you and Jim, then, and I'll watch Mr. Thomas Walcott, who'll get a bullet into him if he moves off that chair."

Tom saw Wilson and Jim leave the room, and his heart sank.

He knew how easily Micky would listen to plausible talk, and be entrapped into the house. With both captured, the villains were safe from discovery by any one else.

Mackenzie McLeod sat down and laid the pistol on the table beside him. He seemed to have no fear of Tom's making any attempt to escape, yet he would be ready to thwart him if he did so. He lit his pipe, and, picking up a newspaper, calmly glanced it over.

Tom looked around. He saw that, to get out of the room, he would be obliged to pass Mackenzie McLeod, who could seize the pistol before the second step could be taken. It would be madness to make a rush for the door.

"In five minutes they'll have Micky a prisoner," he thought, "and then all hope for both of us will be gone. What will poor Dick think? What will mother and Nell? Heavens! I must escape—I must act now."

He felt in his pocket and found he had a silver dollar. He concealed it in his hand and let his hand rest on his knee. In his other hand he held his cap.

Knowing McLeod's eye was on him, he sat quite still for several seconds, looking as innocent and as frightened as possible.

Suddenly he let his cap fall to the floor. He timed the act so that McLeod saw it, and he did it so naturally that it appeared quite accidental.

McLeod turned a page of the paper, and went on reading as confidently as if he was guarding a child four years old.

Tom, purposely assuming a most frightened and nervous manner, stooped down from the chair to pick up the cap. He timed this so that McLeod would not see him, but would know what he was doing without looking at him.

The hand that reached to the floor for the cap held the silver dollar.

Suddenly, through the force of a dexterous twist of the fingers, the silver coin went flying up over McLeod's head, without being seen by him. It struck the wall behind him, making a noise that caused him to turn quickly in his chair.

This was the opportunity Tom wanted, and he had the nerve to grasp it.

He bounded to his feet, gave the chair a shove with his foot, and Mackenzie McLeod, losing his balance, fell to the floor.

Before he could rise, the chair descended with such force on his head that he uttered a groan, rolled over on his back and lay still.

Tom snatched up the revolver from the table and hurried out of the room through the nearest door.

He found himself in the hall that led to the front door. The front part of the hall was lit up. Where he stood was dark.

The front door was a few inches open. He was about to make a dash for it when he heard footsteps on the piazza.

He looked about him. Underneath the stairway was another stairs going down to the basement. He put his hand on the banister and guided himself around to the head of it.

Concealed thus in the darkness, he stood for some moments looking down the hall.

His fear was intensified by the horrible thought that he had probably killed the man who was lying in the room.

The front door suddenly opened and Jim and Wilson entered.

"Curse the luck!" growled the latter.

"It may be just as well," said Jim, soothingly. "He's gone home and he'll think Walcott has done the same."

In spite of his fear a throb of joy went through Tom's heart. Micky Flynn was still free. The men had failed to secure him.

This was enough to encourage Tom to fight hard for his life.

He stood watching the men to see if they would leave the door unlocked, his heart beating wildly with the fear that Mac would revive and emerge from the room before the men had entered it.

Caleb Wilson locked the front door and put the key in his pocket. He then turned and followed Jim into the parlor where Tom had first sat.

Tom hesitated for a moment. Like a frightened, hunted deer, he knew not which way to turn.

To get out by the front door was an impossibility. He would be caught before he could attempt to force the lock. To go down the hall the other way was to rush into he knew not what danger, for he could see a streak of light under a door, and to go down in the dark basement seemed the same.

He had but little time to think. The men were crossing through the parlor. They had but a few steps to take to get to where Mac was lying senseless.

One glance at him would tell the story. They would dash out into the hall after the fugitive.

Tom took two steps down the dark stairway and stopped. A thought struck him that this was the first place they would seek him.

He turned, ascended the steps again, stole quickly along the hall, and bounded up the carpeted and lighted stairway, making as little noise as possible.

He had got no more than halfway up when he heard exclamations of horror and rage in the room below to his right.

The men had discovered Mac.

He got to the head of the stairs just as the door of the room below was thrown open.

"Quick, before he gets out of the house! Take no risks, but shoot him down like a dog!" he heard Caleb Wilson say.

Weakened by fright he stood leaning against the balustrade, a thrill of horror going to the very depths of his soul.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Tom Walcott was as frightened as a man can be and still have power to move.

He had thought Mackenzie McLeod a person to be dreaded, but this man Wilson's voice had a sound that was terrifying. It bespoke a will that would not stop at the shedding of blood.

Tom still had the pistol he had picked up from the table. For a moment he thought of remaining where he was at the head of the stairs and shooting the first man that threatened to come up. It was fortunate for him that he changed his mind, as he would certainly have been shot.

He listened. He heard the slamming of several doors and then the quick tread of some one going down into the basement.

He also heard the savage voice of Mackenzie McLeod, and, frightened as he was, he experienced a feeling of glad relief, for it showed him he had not taken a human life.

"Stand at the foot of the stairs there," came a voice from below. "Mac, you search the dining-room, quick! If he's not there he must have gone upstairs."

"He may have got out."

"He couldn't."

"I mean while the front door was open."

"He didn't have time. Look in the closet."

"He's not there. Have you searched below?"

"Yes. It was dark here. He couldn't have had time to hide."

"Then he's either gone upstairs or into the kitchen. Look in the kitchen, Mac."

Tom was almost frozen with terror.

He looked around and saw there was a hall running longitudinally from where he stood.

He darted on tiptoe down this hall, not knowing where he was going, but feeling that anything was better than to stand at the head of the stairs, where he must be seen the next moment.

Ahead of him was a dim light.

It came through a transom over a door.

He passed the door and stopped.

He found another hall running transversely, and, near the intersection, was a second stairs leading to the lower floor.

He paused in greater fear than ever. He dared not go further and risk meeting some one coming up this stairs.

He turned back and had just got in front of the room wherein was the light, when he again heard the voices of the men.

They were ascending the front stairs. At least two of them were. The other was likely posted at the foot of the back stairs.

The perspiration was rolling down Tom's face. He could hear the tread of approaching feet, and knew that but a second or two must pass till he was caught.

There was but one course before him, unless he chose to stand and exchange shots with them.

He opened the door of the lighted room and entered. He closed the door without waiting to look at the interior of the room. He dared not turn the key. The men were already in the hall and might hear it.

He flew silently across the room to a window and lifted up the long, thick blind which covered it. He had a vague idea there was a bed in the room, and a sofa and some other articles of furniture, but whether there was any living occupant he could not

tell. He had not time to look, and the light was turned so low that he could scarcely have seen if he had looked.

The lifting up of the curtain showed him a window with iron bars across it. The bars were close to the glass.

Scarcely knowing what he was doing, he drew the curtain aside, stepped onto the window-sill and let the curtain fall down in front of him. He had plenty of room, as the embrasure was fully a foot and a half deep.

He now had the curtain on one side of him, solid, plastered walls on two sides, and the iron bars on the other.

The men had ceased talking. They were probably listening near the head of the stairs.

Tom had great difficulty in suppressing his rapid breathing occasioned by his terrible excitement. He wondered if there was any one in the room. If so had they heard or seen him?

The light was so dim that it scarcely showed through the curtain. He dared not push the curtain aside to look out, lest there should be some one at the door.

Presently he heard sounds in the hall, the quick and stealthy tread of feet and whispered voices.

A rap came on the door. He held his breath.

"Who's there?" called out a voice almost beside him.

Heavens! There was an occupant of the room! There was some one in the bed—some one who had just been aroused from sleep.

Tom's heart stood still.

"It's me—Jim," said the voice in the hall.

"What do you want, Uncle Jim?" asked the voice in the room.

"Did you hear any noise?"

"No, Jim. I just woke up when you rapped. What's the matter?"

"Is your door locked?"

"No. Why? You frighten me."

"Don't be frightened. I want to know if any one entered your room just now?"

"Oh, goodness gracious! Oh, Jim!"

There was a little nervous scream, caused solely by Jim's words, and the occupant of the room shuddered so that the bed creaked.

Tom was now almost paralyzed with fright. The occupant of the room was a woman.

She had been asleep when he entered, and consequently knew not that there was any one concealed behind the blind. But her nervousness—the excessive nervousness and fidgetiness peculiar to a woman in such circumstances, was likely—almost certain—to lead to his discovery.

"Oh, Jim!" she cried again.

"What?"

"Did you say any one came in here?"

"No, Flora. Be calm. Don't get scared. I merely asked if any one entered."

"Why? Oh, why, Jim?"

"Are you in bed?"

"Yes."

"May I enter a moment? or will you turn up your light and look around the room?"

"Heavens!" muttered Tom.

"Oh, mercy! I dare not, Uncle Jim. Come in if you please. Oh, please do come in and see. I am almost frightened to death."

Tom gave himself up for lost when he heard the door open and Jim McLeod enter. He instantly thought how natural it was for a woman to insist upon every hole and corner being searched before her fears would be quieted.

"Don't be frightened, Flora," said Jim, gently. "Are you in bed?"

"Yes, Uncle Jim."

"Well, if there's a burglar here I'll catch him."

"A burglar! Oh, oh!"

Jim spoke of a burglar as much to calm his niece as for anything else, but he also wanted to hide from her that they had a prisoner in the house.

A flash on the curtain gave Tom a new start. It was caused by Jim's turning up the light.

Oh, the agony of the next few moments! Tom thought surely the beating of his heart, or his quick, excited breathing, must betray him.

He could hear Jim going quickly about the room, and every moment he expected the curtain to be raised and a pistol thrust into his face.

He would not have been half so much frightened if the occupant of the room had been a man.

How he prayed she would not think of directing Jim's attention to the window.

The latter's search was short. He was evidently in a hurry to join the other searchers, who could be heard in another part of the house. He had likely been convinced there was no one in the room almost as soon as he entered it, and had kept up the search merely to satisfy the timid Flora.

"All right, Flora," he said. "You may go to sleep. There's no one here."

"Oh, Jim, tell me what was the matter."

"Well, Flora, to tell the truth, it was only that pup of mine that got upstairs. I thought he might have got in here."

"Oh, and you frightened me so!"

"Sorry, Flora. Good-night."

"Leave the light lit, Jim. I couldn't sleep in the dark after that fright."

"I will. Don't be afraid."

"Oh, Jim!"

"What?"

"What's that noise?"

"What noise?"

"Listen!"

Tom Walcott scarcely breathed. He was almost fainting from fright. He was every moment expecting the curtain to be raised.

"Downstairs, Jim. Don't you hear it? Who's tramping around?"

"Oh, it's Mac and Caleb. They're helping me look for Carlo."

Jim's lie to quiet his niece's fears, and to prevent her having any suspicions, was a blessing for Tom Walcott, and he appreciated it.

Off went Jim, closing the door after him and leaving the lamp turned up. His footsteps died away down the hall.

Silence followed, broken only by an occasional creak of the bed, due to Flora's nervousness.

Tom turned for a moment toward the window, and immediately his heart gave a leap.

A new fear came upon him.

The light of the lamp was casting his shadow on the window.

Was there anybody on the other side?

He was turning to look out of the window when there was blinding flash almost in his face, a startling report, and a bullet crashed through the glass.

The same moment the lady shrieked out in mortal terror.

CHAPTER XIX.

When Tom saw the flash, almost in his face, and heard the explosion and the crash of glass, he gave himself up for lost.

He thought some one on the other side of the window had seen his shadow and was shooting in at him.

He leaped out from behind the curtain just as the lady shrieked the second time, and in an instant he saw the cause of his fright.

There had been no one shooting in at him. His own pistol had been accidentally discharged when he leaned against the bars to look out of the window. It was still smoking in his hand.

He looked around. The woman was in the bed. She had gone off in a dead faint from the effects of the shock.

He sprang again behind the window curtain; he was certain the tremendous noise would bring the men upon him instantly. He could hear them running about below.

Hark! what was the matter? There was the noise of a terrific struggle going on below. What did it mean? Why were the men so long in coming to see the cause of the uproar he had made?

He did not know that at that moment the three of them were struggling with the pugnacious Micky Flynn, who had broken into the house as soon as the door was opened.

He listened again. Some one ran up the stairs and then ran down again. There was running here and there—it seemed all over the house.

But as yet no one appeared to be coming toward the room.

The woman was reviving. She emitted a slight scream. She was struggling to rise. She was sure to shriek again from fright when she was able to do so.

If she did this the men would certainly locate the sound, for the uproar below had ceased.

She must be prevented from shrieking or Tom's life would pay the price of it.

He was in a terrible dilemma. To remain still was to let her betray him; to step out was to take chances of driving her into hysterics.

He must risk his life on a bold chance.

"Flora," he called, putting his face close to the window to soften his voice and give to it the effect of distance. "Flora," he repeated. She uttered a smothered cry. In her fright she had covered her head with the bedclothes.

He listened. There were no sounds of any one in the hall.

He sprang out of the window, rushed across the room and turned the key in the door.

"Flora," he called again, this time putting all the pathos possible into his voice. "Flora," he whispered, coming closer to the bed, "I am the young man you saved before. Oh, please listen! Don't shriek again. Don't be afraid. I am in danger."

She did shriek, but the bedclothes modified the sound.

Then, as he pleaded in a low, soft voice that was calculated to diminish terror in any one, she drew the coverlet down from her face and looked at him.

She would have shrieked again in fright but for his presence of mind.

He had taken out the silk handkerchief with which three months before she had blindfolded him in the darkness, and which he had preserved ever since. He tied it quickly around his forehead to make himself look as she had last seen him.

Ingenuous device.

She shuddered, looked at him again, and—the great source of danger was gone. She was no longer afraid. She recognized him.

"Flora, you know me?" he said. "Listen. The men are looking for me. They mean to take my life. Hark! I hear them on the stairs. Can you save me?"

"Step into that clothes room. Quick! quick!"

She pointed to the door as she spoke.

Tom fairly flew across the room on tiptoe.

He entered the closet and drew the door softly after him, as a heavy rap sounded on the outer door.

"Flora!" called a voice from the hall.

"Yes," answered the lady.

Tom could hear her stepping across the room. He knew she was hastily donning a dress. She turned the key and opened the door.

"Oh, what is it, Uncle Mac?" she cried, before he had time to ask a question. "What is the cause of all that noise below? I am frightened almost to death."

"Did you hear a shot just now?"

"Yes; oh, yes. It terrified me. What is the matter?"

"Where was it, Flora? Where did it seem—"

"It sounded in the room above the parlor."

Tom knew this was at the opposite end of the house. Flora had told a lie to save him.

He could hear Mac turn away and run down the hall, and the same moment the lady threw open the closet door.

"Come!" she whispered. "Quick; I will try to save you, but oh!—my life and yours are in danger if they— Hark!"

"They are not coming this way."

"You must cross the hall to the room opposite this. When there you'll find a door to your left. It leads to an unused room over the kitchen. Quick! I'll endeavor to get Uncle Mac downstairs."

She kept her promise. As Tom stole across the room mentioned she hurried down the hall.

A moment later she could be heard calling:

"Uncle Mac, Uncle Mac!"

"What?" cried the latter, rushing out to meet her.

"What's that noise, Uncle Mac?"

"Where? where?" he asked, excitedly.

"Outside in the back yard."

Her stratagem worked successfully.

Downstairs flew Mac, three steps at a time, to find out what was going on in the back yard.

Meanwhile Tom Walcott had got to the garret over the kitchen. When he closed the door on himself he saw, in the midst of the darkness, a round hole of light in the floor. It was an open stove-pipe hole.

Hearing sounds below, he crawled on his hands and knees over to the hole and looked down.

He saw, to his surprise, Micky Flynn tied fast, hand and foot, and Caleb and Jim mounted guard over him.

CHAPTER XX.

The men were questioning Micky, and he was answering them with the most admirable readiness and candor, at the same time cunningly pretending to be about three times as frightened as he really was.

Tom, with his face against the hole, could see the three of them and hear every word distinctly.

"What were you doing at the back door?" asked Jim McLeod.

"Watchin'," said Micky.

"Watching for what?"

"To see that none of you escaped."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed the two villains, in alarm.

"I mean I was standin' guard till the police came."

"What?"

"Oh!—o-oh!" shivered Micky, "you're frightenin' me. They'll think I'm in league with you—"

"Who'll think?"

"The police. Oh, let me go. They'll be here soon."

"Here? Who sent for them?"

"I did. I dispatched a boy who was passin' the gate, an' a moment later I told a man to go. He says: 'What for?' says he. I says: 'Call the police quick!' says I; 'there's a friend o' mine detained by thieves and villains in that house.'"

This was a simple invention on Micky's part, but it was told with such an air of truth that Tom himself believed it for a time.

It created consternation among the villains.

Mackenzie McLeod had entered in time to hear it, and it set him wild.

"Good heavens!" he cried; "we'll be caught. They're probably on the way here now."

"They must be," said Micky, "for both the man an' boy said they'd run their hardest an' get all the help they could. Ough! They'll capture me, thinkin' I'm one o' you."

Tom feared that Mac, in his temper, would do Micky harm. The scoundrel was in a rage that was suppressed only by his fear. He ground his teeth and shook his fist at the prisoner.

Tom noiselessly cocked his revolver. He resolved to shoot down at the first one that attempted to lay a hand on Micky.

But it suddenly occurred to him to examine his weapon and see how many chambers were loaded.

Heavens! Every barrel was empty!

He had fired his last shot and he and Micky were helpless.

"What are we to do?" said Jim McLeod. "Did you find young Walcott, Mac?"

"No; he's gone. He must have escaped while you were outside."

This was a cue for Micky, and he was not long acting on it.

"Yes, he's gone, too," he exclaimed.

"Gone where?" cried the men.

"After the police. That's how I came to be mountin' guard over the back door. Tom says to me—'Micky,' says he, 'I'll go for the police an' you—'"

The remainder of Micky's artful speech was drowned in a howl of rage.

Mackenzie McLeod was about to spring upon the lad, but the others held him back.

"Let him alone," said Jim. "We'll settle him later. We have our own safety to think of first."

"You're right. Come and help me get out the horses and wagon, Caleb. We must fly to the retreat. We'll take this fellow and Flora with us. Jim, you'll follow on horseback, close behind, so that if there's any danger of the wagon being stopped you can ride up and—"

"I understand. Your plan is the best. Go ahead, you and Caleb, and I'll get this fellow ready and tell Flora."

Mac and Caleb hurried out the back way, and Jim ran off to call Flora.

Micky, tied fast to the chair, was left in the room alone.

"Hist!" said Tom in a whisper.

"Who's there?" said Micky, looking up.

"It is I—Tom Walcott."

"You, Tom? Good! You're safe. D'y'e see how I'm throwin' thim devils off the track?"

"Yes. Oh, Micky, take care. Don't arouse the temper of that man called Mac. My only fear is they'll kill you. Listen."

"What?"

"Go with them quietly. I'll try and save you."

"You'll follow?"

"If I can."

"If I wasn't tied I'd—"

"Shish! Make no struggle, or they'll kill you, Micky. Trust to me."

"But you may lose the trail."

"That's the great fear. I may lose it on the start—Micky."

"Shish! Not so loud! What?"

"Can you think of no plan?"

"Never mind plans. Listen to me. If I never come back, if these men kill me, I want you to—"

"What, Micky?"

"Tell my mother not to fret about me—"

"Oh, Micky!"

"An' tell Lanty Whalen I'm sorry for stalin' his terrier. If I die tell Jinsey Dolan he can have my boxin' gloves, but if he don't give back the game rooster he tuk I'll punch his head an'—"

"Micky!"

"Whist! he's comin'. Not a word on your life!"

Micky made a sign with his head as he stopped, and almost the same moment Jim McLeod re-entered the room.

Tom was powerless to do anything. He was in fear and trembling lest Jim would kill the lad below.

In a few minutes Jim had Micky tied in a way that enabled him to safely release him from the chair.

Caleb Wilson entered out of breath.

"Quick! Help me carry this duffer out to the wagon," he said.

"Hold on a minute till I gag him."

Just as the two started to carry Micky out, Tom left the stove-pipe hole and began to crawl back quickly toward the door. He had a slight hope of being able to get out of the house before the wagon could get away.

But he had great difficulty in locating the door. It maddened him when he found he had not even a single match in his pocket.

He found the door at last, after a delay of about three minutes. From there he had little trouble in reaching the hall where he had last seen Flora. He stole noiselessly to the head of the stairs.

If he could get down to the front door and get it opened before he was discovered, all would be well.

He started, and had descended about six steps, when he heard a noise in the hall below.

He stopped, listened a moment, and then drew back.

Somebody was advancing up the hall toward the front door.

"Hurry up, Flora!" he heard Mac calling from the dining-room.

He looked over the banister and saw the girl dressed ready for the journey.

She saw him, and made a sign to him to go back, that there was danger. She seemed to be crying.

He waited till he heard the noise of a door closing at the back, and then started down the stairs again.

He was in darkness now, for the girl had turned off the light as soon as she signaled to him.

He reached the front door and felt for the key. It was gone. A big padlock, whose chain rattled when he touched it, showed that the door was secured by no ordinary fastening. He could not get out that way.

He groped his way to the front room in which he had first sat and tried the window.

It had shutters on the inside! They were locked.

His only means of exit was at the back of the house, and there he dared not go, as the men might not yet have left the kitchen.

He listened. There was a noise at the back of the house, but whether inside or out he could not tell.

He must get out before the wagon left. Otherwise the villains would escape him altogether. They would probably murder poor Micky and throw him in the river.

Hark! there was the noise again. It was the wagon! And it was now at the side of the house. There was no time to be lost.

Tom hurried out into the hall and traversed the whole of it. He boldly opened a door in front of him. The room was dark.

He groped his way across and found another door. It also was unlocked, and led him to the kitchen, where a lighted lamp stood on a table.

This showed they had not all gone yet. He stole softly across the kitchen, passed through a porch, and entered the back yard.

He heard a noise in the stable.

It was no doubt Jim McLeod getting a horse ready.

Tom stole around the house and ran down the gravel path toward the front gate.

He arrived there in time to see a vehicle disappearing down the street to his left.

Back down the path toward the stable he ran again, keeping in the shadow of the fence and making as little noise as possible.

He saw the horse standing in the middle of the back yard.

Jim had gone into the house to put out the light and close the doors.

Now was the time. Tom ran forward and caught the horse's bridle rein.

Next moment he was on the animal's back and galloping off as Jim appeared at the porch door.

CHAPTER XXI.

Micky followed Tom's advice about keeping quiet. In fact, he had to do so, for he was bound and gagged so tightly that he could neither move nor speak.

He was roughly handled, and a pistol was put to his head to emphasize the threat that his brains would be blown out if he tried to give any trouble.

He was laid under the two seats of a light wagon, and a buffalo skin was thrown over him. Mackenzie McLeod's feet rested on him, so that he could not move.

As his hands were tied behind his back, and his whole weight was on them, Micky's position was decidedly uncomfortable. The jolting of the wagon, which started off at a good speed and was soon being driven at a furious rate, made matters worse.

He thought if the journey should be long his arms would be broken.

To cry out for help was not only dangerous, but wholly impossible. The gag was so tight that it was almost cutting his mouth.

To escape by his own efforts was clearly out of the question. Unless Tom should save him he was lost, for he had heard the men express their intention of "putting him out of the way."

Mac wanted to do it before starting, "to get the trouble off their hands," as he expressed it, but he was overruled by Caleb and Jim, who thought it safer to wait till they got to the Retreat, or at least out of the city.

Mile after mile was traversed, and Micky at last gave up hope of rescue. At the rate of speed he was being carried away he deemed it impossible for Tom to keep up with them, even if he got the trail on the start.

When Tom galloped out of the yard and gained the street he found that the wagon was out of sight. But he knew the direction it had taken, so, giving rein to the horse, he started in hot pursuit.

His great danger was in being stopped by the police for fast riding; his next greatest was that of taking the wrong road on the start.

At every crossing he pulled up a little and looked right and left. Then he bounded on.

In about ten minutes, to his great relief, he came in sight of the wagon, so that one of the two dangers was removed.

He believed he could keep it in sight if he was not stopped.

But another thing bothered him. He not only wanted to pursue the wagon, but he also wanted to get help. He wanted to give the alarm to some of the city police so that they might mount and join him in the chase.

This seemed the only way to insure Micky's release and the capture of the villains.

To get this help was a difficult thing. It necessitated a stop of at least a couple of minutes, and to stop now, within the city, where the streets and intersections were so plentiful, was to let the wagon get too far ahead. It meant losing the trail for a time at least.

Moreover, the wagon was increasing its speed. It required a good smart gallop to keep up with it. It turned corner after corner, and altered its course so frequently that Tom was obliged to use all his efforts to keep it in sight.

Sometimes, when he got to one corner, he saw it just disappearing around another, and once he came nearly losing sight of it in this way. He was within an ace of turning in the wrong direction.

CHAPTER XXII.

As he neared the wagon Tom saw on the side of the road a bank about fifteen feet high.

He had gained such control of the horse that he thought he could make it do anything.

He made it balk a bit, forced it off the road, and urged it up the path that led to the top of the bank.

When he got there he quickly dismounted and pretended to be trying to quiet the animal.

He was in the shade of a clump of trees; he could look down upon the woman and the two men in the wagon, and they could but just see the outlines of him and the horse.

"What's the matter, Jim?" asked Mac.

"The darned horse!" grunted Tom, groaning as if in pain and manipulating the rein so as to keep the horse moving.

"Is there anybody following us?"

"Yes."

This was the truth, for presumably Jim was following.

"Then we must lose no time," said Caleb Wilson. "Let us drive on. First thing we know this duffer'll get the gag off and shout."

A thrill of joy shot through Tom. He knew that Micky was still alive.

"Jim!" said Mac.

"What?" groaned Tom, in a voice that would pass for that of Jim or any one else who was wounded.

"You'd better go ahead of us."

"Yes."

"Take the bridge path here and cross to the Retreat. See that all is right and have the big gate open ready; we'll have to take the wagon around by the road."

Tom looked across the road and saw the path referred to; if he only knew where the Retreat was he felt he would be all right.

"Do you think anything's wrong there?" he groaned.

He was trying to draw out an answer that would enable him to locate the Retreat, and he succeeded.

"No, but it's safer. The signal is all right. See!"

"Where? I can't see it from here."

Mac pointed to the hill away to the left.

"See the two lights one above the other?"

"Oh, yes!" said Tom.

He saw a house about three-quarters of a mile distant by the straight course, and two windows lighted up, one above the other.

"Go on, go on, quick!" he groaned. "Danger! I'll take the path."

"Yes, hurry up," said Mac, and he started the wagon.

Tom waited till they had gone a couple of hundred yards, and then led the horse down off the bank.

The path, which Mac had spoken of ran at an angle of about eighty degrees from the road and in the direction of the house on the hill, which, at that distance, could be seen and distinguished only because it loomed up against the sky.

Tom, realizing that fortune had come to his aid, crossed the road, got on the path, and mounted the horse.

He soon perceived why the wagon could not take this route. The path, in some places, was very narrow and ran between high rocks.

The wagon seemed to be going in an opposite direction. The noise of it was becoming fainter every moment. It evidently had to take a very roundabout course.

Tom now made the greatest speed he could. He wanted to arrive at the Retreat first, and gain as much time on Mac and Caleb as possible.

He reached the hill, ascended more than halfway and stopped. He dismounted and tied the horse.

The hill was long, but not steep. The house was situated near the top of it—a two-storied frame building, with a barn a little distance from it. No other building was in sight.

Tom approached cautiously but quickly. All was still about the place. It would have seemed uninhabited but for the lights in the two windows.

Thinking some one might have observed his approach—though it was so dark he could not see the horse where he had left him—he stopped and listened.

There was no sound near at hand, but, away off down in the valley, he could hear the noise of the approaching wagon.

It would take it a considerable time to reach the house, as it was no nearer than when Tom parted with it.

Suddenly one of the lights in the house—the lower one—moved. The window was darkened and a moment later another window was lighted up.

The lamp had been carried from one room to another.

Tom took this as an indication he had not been seen, and made bold to approach more closely.

He got right up to the window and found he could see under the curtain, which was drawn down to within an inch of the sill.

He looked in.

"Heavens!" he exclaimed, and in his excitement he nearly fell into the cellar window below.

He felt himself trembling like a leaf, but it was with rage rather than fear.

His hesitation was gone. He advanced boldly to the door and rapped loudly.

While waiting, he heard the wagon still quite a distance off, but rapidly approaching.

"Who's there?" called some one from the inside.

"Me," said Tom. "Open, quick! Mac and Caleb are coming."

"Jim!"

"What? Be quick!"

"Oh, all right."

There were sounds of bolts being withdrawn. Tom closed his fists.

The door was thrown open.

Before him in the lighted hall stood Hardy, the mustached dandy.

The sight of this individual was enough to make Tom feel like a mad bull with a red rag before him.

He bounded into the hall, kicked the door shut behind him, and gave Hardy a blow in the face that sent him staggering back against the stairs.

"You scoundrel!" he cried. "We've come face to face at last."

He stood back and waited for Hardy to rise. He felt he had a right to do so, as he was partly wreaking a personal satisfaction.

Hardy got slowly to his feet. The look of surprise on his face made him look much more frightened than he was.

He tried to draw a revolver from his pocket, but Tom covered him too quickly.

"Put up your hands!"

Hardy raised his hands and Tom took the revolver from his pocket.

"Now answer my questions. Who's in this house?"

"Only me—not so loud, please."

"Why not so loud? Who's in the house?"

"No one. Hush!"

"Where is Harry Macdonald?"

"I don't know."

Tom saw by Hardy's looks that there was some one else in the house who did not share all his secrets. He wanted to bring matters to a close, so, laying down his revolver behind him, he said:

"Come, now, fight me this instant. I give you what you don't deserve."

Hardy took the chance offered him as being better than answering questions with a pistol leveled at him.

He sprang at Tom and received a whack in the face. He staggered, got to his feet again, and then tried to escape by the door nearest him.

That aggravated Tom beyond endurance. He pitched in and smashed Hardy right and left, finishing up with a blow that caught the hapless dandy on the chin and stretched him out senseless on his back.

"Take that, you villain," he said, "and regard the matter as settled by contra account."

Two minutes later Hardy was bound hand and foot with cords which Tom ruthlessly cut off from a set of curtains covering an arched doorway leading into the parlor.

He was on his knees, gagging his prisoner with his handkerchief, when a pair of hands were laid on his shoulder and a voice behind him cried:

"What are you doing? Leave that poor youth alone."

Tom turned at the sound of the voice, and the same instant the grip of the hands pulled him over on his back.

He seized the legs of his assailant and wrestled with him, and the next moment the two of them were rolling over each other on the floor.

The man was stout and heavy, but not strong. Tom, with his activity and strength, was too much for him.

Their struggle knocked down the hall lamp and broke it, and in the darkness the man contrived to shake himself free and get to his feet.

He made for the archway and got through between the curtains. Tom followed and clutched his coat tails, and for the whole length of a dark room the struggle was continued.

Two things militated against Tom's fighting with his usual vigor. One was that his opponent showed no viciousness whatever. He seemed to be afraid, and fought wholly on the defensive. He wanted to protect Hardy. The other reason was that the contest was uneven, the stout man now being out of breath and almost helpless.

"Look here," said Tom, at last, catching him by the arms, "if you desist I'll not hurt you. Don't attempt to draw a weapon."

"I'll not—I—oh, let me go."

"Bring me to a room where there's a light."

"I'll light the chandelier here if you'll let me."

"Be quick, then."

Tom released him and drew his revolver, to be ready to shoot in case of treachery.

The man lighted up the chandelier, and then turned with pale and frightened face to look at the man with whom he had struggled in the darkness.

"Good heavens! Young Walcott! Is it you?" he cried, and, falling back, he leaned against a chair for support.

The revolver dropped from Tom's nerveless hand, for the shock was the greatest he had ever received.

He saw before him the last man he expected to find in the rendezvous of a gang of thieves.

It was the man who had caused him all his trouble—the nameless individual for whom he had made such long and diligent search.

It was his mysterious employer.

CHAPTER XXIII.

It was several seconds before either of the two recovered sufficiently to speak. At last—

"Good Heavens! Walcott!" exclaimed his employer, "what are you doing here? What—"

"What are you doing here?" cried Tom, angrily. "Answer me that."

"I came here on business, Walcott," was the reply. "I—"

"Business!" exclaimed Tom. "It must be nice business when I find you in a den of thieves."

"I don't understand you."

"Who are you, anyhow?"

"My name is Macdonald."

"Macdonald!"

"Yes; they call me Commodore Macdonald."

"Good God! Are you Harry Macdonald's father?"

"Yes, I am the grief-stricken father of that poor, unfortunate young man, now perhaps dead."

"Then, for mercy's sake, what are you doing here?"

"I came with Hardy this afternoon to meet a man who, he said, had information to give me concerning my son."

"Who said?"

"Hardy."

"Do you know who Hardy is?"

"He is my private secretary—a young man of the highest—"

"He's a scoundrel!" said Tom. "He lured you here by deception, so that he and his confederates could force from you a ransom for the recovery of your son."

"What! Hardy? My poor young friend whom you have—"

Tom sprang past him without a word. He rushed out of the front door, closed it quickly after him, and standing on the steps, listened for the wagon.

It was now quite close, scarcely half a mile away. It was approaching at a moderate rate of speed, the beginning of the ascent having been reached.

Tom re-entered, hastily closed and locked the door, and, turning to the astonished Macdonald, said:

"Is there any one else in this house?"

"I think not."

"Help me carry this man out of here—quick!"

"I could not do that. Poor Hardy is innocent."

"I tell you he is a villain of the blackest dye. He's one of the men that stole away your son. Light that lamp on the stand, quick! and follow me."

Hardy had revived and was now in mortal terror. He struggled vainly to shift the gag and get free of his bonds.

Tom stooped and, seizing hold of him, raised him up on his shoulder. Calling to Macdonald to follow him with the light, he hurried to a room at the back of the house, where he found the cellar door.

"What are you going to do, Walcott?"

"Deposit him down there for a while."

"I can have no hand in it."

"Hold the light and ask no more questions. I'm doing this for your son."

"My son?"

"Yes. Hold the light lower."

Macdonald reluctantly obeyed. He could not resist the dominating force of the young man, whom he had instinctively trusted from the first.

It was no easy matter for Tom to deposit his prisoner in the cellar. He was obliged to let him slide slowly, feet first, down the steps.

"There," he said, as he closed the trapdoor. "That's one of the men that tried to ruin you. Now obey me for the next ten minutes, for there is no time for explanations."

"What do you mean, Walcott? What—"

"I mean that there's danger for the lives of both of us. Do you hear that?"

"I hear a wagon."

"Yes; it contains the villains that Hardy expected. They'll be here in a moment. Give me the lamp. Come! You must take this revolver of Hardy's and be prepared to defend yourself."

"Good heavens!"

"Here! This room is the best place. Now listen."

"You frighten me. Who's coming?"

"The men who stole your son—Hardy is one of the gang."

"Never! He's an employee of mine and I trust him. I cannot listen to aspersions against him."

Tom fired up in an instant.

"So have I been an employee of yours," he said. "Without even knowing your name I served you, and in your service risked my life a dozen times. It is to serve you I am here. Choose between Hardy's word and mine right now!"

"Oh, I apologize, Walcott; I didn't mean to impugn—"

"Shish! say no more."

Tom had spoken in righteous indignation, fired chiefly by the thought of Hardy's perfidy. At the first word of apology he softened. In a few words, quickly uttered, he gave Macdonald an idea of what was taking place.

"There'll likely be a struggle now," he said, "and we've simply got to overcome the villains both to insure our own safety and rescue my friend."

"By force, Walcott?" asked the frightened listener.

"By force or stratagem, or both," answered Tom. "All I know is my friend is not going to die while I have strength to fight. Come to the back door with me. Quick!"

"Are they here yet?"

Tom opened the shed door a few inches and looked out.

"They are just entering the yard. Now is the great danger."

"What?" exclaimed Macdonald.

"They may attempt to kill poor Micky before they enter."

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

"Stay here and lock this door if they go to enter by it. That will force them around to the front door. I will give three little raps if I want this opened."

"For mercy's sake, where are you going?"

"Out into the yard. I want to see what they intend doing. They have let the woman out first."

Macdonald trembled. He was evidently a timid man, and dreaded being left alone. But he was compelled to follow the directions he had received.

Tom slipped out into the yard and glided behind a woodpile.

He saw the two men unhitching the horses, while the woman stood waiting a few yards away from them.

Presently one of the men led the horses into the stable. The other went to the back of the wagon and lifted an end of the buffalo robe.

Tom raised his revolver and leveled it at this man. He was ready to pull the trigger at the sign of a movement indicative of danger to Micky.

In his heart he was afraid that Micky might already have been stabbed.

"Mac!" called the man at the wagon.

"Hush!" came the answer from the stable. "Wait till we go in or else come here."

Caleb left the wagon and entered the stable. Had it not been for the woman Tom would now have acted. But she would shriek if he emerged from his hiding place.

After a while the two men came out of the stable and walked to where the woman stood. Then the three of them went around to the front of the house.

Tom stole quickly to the shed door and gave three soft taps. It opened and he stepped in.

"They're at the front door," he whispered. "Go you quickly and open it."

"I," exclaimed Macdonald, in terror.

"Yes; they won't touch you. Act as if nothing happened, and as if you suspect nothing. Be civil to them, and say you're waiting for Hardy."

"Walcott, I'm afraid—"

"Go," said Tom, "if you wish to save your son's life. I tell you they'll not touch you!"

He almost shoved Macdonald from the door as he spoke. He waited till he had heard him pass through the kitchen, and then he stole quietly out through the shed door again.

He heard a loud knocking on the front door. He ran around the woodpile, crawled quickly along in the shadow of a fence, and reached the stable.

In another moment he was at the wagon, and on the side remote from the house.

"Keep still, Micky," he whispered. "It is I—Tom Walcott."

He raised the buffalo skin, and there was poor Micky, still alive, but tied hand and foot.

With his knife Tom soon cut the gag and ropes.

"Crawl out quickly, Micky," he whispered, "and follow me."

"I'm hardly able to move, Tom. My arms—"

"Hark! What's that?"

Both listened. There were sounds of a horse galloping in the valley. It was commencing to ascend the hill by the bridge path.

"It's Jim McLeod," exclaimed Tom. "He's caught his horse again. Quick, Micky! We must act before he gets here."

The two ran to the shed door and entered by it. For a couple of moments they stood whispering in the darkness.

Then they separated. Micky went back out into the yard, and Tom proceeded to the kitchen.

The latter stole along to the entrance of the hall leading to the front door. He listened.

The girl, Flora, had gone upstairs. The men were in the parlor talking to Mr. Macdonald. As Tom expected, they were talking as if nothing had happened, and trying to make Macdonald believe they were neighbors who had called to spend the evening. They appeared in great humor at having found their prey there ahead of them.

Presently there came a thunderous rap on the front door.

"Caleb!" called a voice from without.

It was Micky Flynn, who no sooner rapped and called out than he made for the back door in accordance with Tom's directions.

Caleb Wilson went to the front door, opened it, and stepped outside.

Instantly Tom darted down the hall and turned the key in the front door. Then he called out "Mac," and ran quickly back to the kitchen, where he met Micky.

Mackenzie McLeod emerged from the parlor, walked down the hall, and received two blows in the face as he reached the kitchen.

Micky and Tom sprang upon him, upset him, and, in spite of his struggles, hauled him to the trapdoor leading to the cellar.

At the point of the pistol Mac was forced down the cellar steps, and the door was lowered upon him and securely fastened.

"There," said Micky. "That's number one disposed of. Now for Master Caleb."

"And we must be quick," said Tom, "for Jim McLeod's almost here."

CHAPTER XXIV.

Micky had locked the back door so that Caleb could not enter to assist his companion.

A loud knocking on the front door was now heard.

Mr. Macdonald was standing shivering in the hall, not knowing what to do.

"Open the front door," whispered Tom, to him from the kitchen, "and act as if nothing had happened—quick!"

Macdonald opened the door; Caleb Wilson, pale and panting, rushed in.

"What's the matter? Who locked the door? Where's Mac?" he cried, looking around in bewilderment.

Macdonald stammered something in reply, and turned to go into the parlor.

Caleb started to follow him, when he heard a voice in the kitchen calling:

"Caleb! Caleb! Here—quick!"

Down the hall he came running, and, as he reached the kitchen, he tripped over Micky's foot, purposely projected, and fell headlong to the floor.

Before he could rise, Micky, with his long legs and arms, was on top of him, and Tom had his pistol to his head.

"Surrender," said Tom, "or you're a dead man."

There was no surrender to Caleb Wilson, old as he was. He was endowed with all the qualities of the bulldog, and he fought like one.

But he was at a disadvantage. Micky alone would have been enough for him. Between Tom and Micky they bound him with the ropes that had tied Micky himself, and then they locked him in a little closet back of the hall stairway.

They now had only Jim McLeod to deal with, and, contrary to their expectations, he proved the hardest customer of all, and that in spite of the great advantages they had over him.

He was admitted in the same manner by Macdonald, but, when Micky and Tom, concealed in the kitchen, called to him, he became suspicious and whipped out a revolver.

"Who's in this house?" he cried, leveling it upon the poor frightened Macdonald.

"I don't know. I—I—" stammered the latter.

"Drop that weapon," shouted Tom, from the darkness of the adjoining room.

He had thrown open the door between the two rooms.

Jim McLeod leaped to his feet and rushed toward the dark room. Tom fired, to frighten him only, but the bullet struck Jim's arm, and his revolver dropped.

Micky and Tom sprang upon him, but, before they succeeded in getting him tied, they had to call in the assistance of Macdonald.

So the whole gang was captured by two clever boys. At daylight Mr. Macdonald started off on horseback for Long Island City, leaving Tom and Micky to guard the helpless prisoners.

He returned before noon with no less than eight constables, and Hardy, Wilson and the desperate McLeod brothers were taken into custody.

They found young Harry Macdonald in the same cellar in which Tom had imprisoned Hardy and Mac. He had been confined in the house for three months, and the men had taken turns in staying with him and watching him. At the time of the capture Hardy was serving his second turn.

Little by little the whole plot came out, and, like every other mystery, it proved to be a simple one when it was understood.

The McLeod brothers had conceived the design of getting their niece, Flora, married to young Macdonald, he being the son of a multi-millionaire, and having something like two millions in his own right.

The idea suggested itself to them very naturally, for young Harry, as they learned, had been keeping company with the girl, and seemed very fond of her, till his father had interfered to put a stop to the clandestine courtship.

The commodore did not know who Flora was, but he guessed she was not high enough in the social scale for a son of his, and he brought such pressure to bear upon Harry, that it seemed, for a time at least, as if the latter was forsaking his sweetheart.

This determined the McLeod brothers upon forcing matters. They had never seen young Macdonald, but they managed to learn how the affair was going. They plotted with a friend of theirs, Caleb Wilson, to abduct Harry and hold him till he had married Flora.

Wilson had a son who was clever at artifice. By means of forged recommendations he got into Commodore Macdonald's employ, assuming the name of Hardy for greater safety. He succeeded so well in ingratiating himself into Mr. Macdonald's favor that he soon won his entire confidence, and in this way was able to post his colleagues.

It was he that conceived the idea of leading Harry Macdonald on to his capture by playing upon his greatest weakness, namely, his love for the romantic. He composed a romantic letter and got the McLeod brothers to induce Flora to write it to Harry. It asked him to go to Central Park to a certain tree, and then to a certain bench, under which he would find something, of the nature of a message.

The letter intimated that Flora herself was under restrictions, and was obliged to resort to this as the only means of communicating with her lover. In the orange peel was a small paper saying that if Harry went to a certain tree near Pleasant Plains, Staten Island, at a certain hour, somebody would come along and lay a glove, or some such article, behind the tree, and that it would likely be somebody he would be glad to see. A strong hint that it would be Flora herself.

What young man, imbued with romanticism, would not take such a bait? It showed Hardy had a deep insight into human nature.

Now Flora was forced to write the first letter; the other was a forgery. She was not a willing party to the plot in any way. She was an innocent and worthy lady who, somehow or other, was completely dominated by her strong-minded uncle, Mackenzie McLeod. She loved her uncles who, with all their faults, were invariably kind to her, and, until the last, she fully trusted them.

She herself went secretly to Central Park, intending to confess to Harry what she had been obliged to do. We know how she was disappointed at not seeing him.

The reader knows by this time that Harry Macdonald never received Flora's letter, and that he would not have been captured at all had he not accidentally been in Madison Square when Tom Walcott and Flora were driving through. He recognized Flora's face at the carriage window. He followed the vehicle to Washington Park and, as we know, stepped into the carriage ahead of Tom. Flora did not know the difference till they had arrived

home, and Mac and Jim, who had unexpectedly returned, seized the new prisoner.

It was Commodore Macdonald who received Flora's letter. He purposely opened his son's letter to see whom he was corresponding with, for he had a fearful dread of a mesalliance. He gave out that he was going to Europe simply so that he could guard his son, and only his friend, Mrs. Moffat, and his private secretary, Hardy, were in the secret. That was the information Hardy telephoned to Wilson the day Tom was captured.

To Commodore Macdonald's efforts to remain in concealment may be ascribed Tom's being unable to find him, and all those actions of his that appeared so mysterious. He was the leading stockholder in the Wall Street company, and consequently had the *entrée* to the office, but he went there only at night, as he did not wish even the members of the firm to know he was not in Europe.

His reason for employing Tom to go to Central Park was that he wanted some one to pick up the something and get the verbal message before his son Harry could again be drawn under the girl's influence.

So that when Tom came to the trysting place at Pleasant Plains it was quite natural for Jim and Mac to assume that he was Harry Macdonald.

Hardy's mentioning the orange peel in the restaurant was not the result of chance. He had seen Tom in Central Park in the vicinity of the bench; he had followed him downtown and, having lost sight of him for a time, had again seen him entering the restaurant. He went in for the purpose of testing Tom. He came out satisfied that Tom had had nothing to do with the message.

The four villains were to participate in the profits expected to accrue from Flora's marriage with Harry; but Wilson had a wild scheme of his own in addition to the other. He had such confidence in his son's cleverness that he hoped he would ultimately succeed in capturing Commodore Macdonald's lovely daughter, Isabel.

Perhaps none of those interested anticipated the exact results that followed.

Harry Macdonald did marry Flora McLeod, and there came a day when the aristocratic commodore was not ashamed to own her as his daughter-in-law.

As for Tom Walcott, whose life she had twice saved, he was proud to acknowledge her as his sister-in-law—for be it known that Tom afterward married Isabel Macdonald and lived in a magnificent mansion on Fifth Avenue, next door to the elegant mansion occupied by his mother, Nell and Dick.

The commodore presented him with a million dollars the day he was married, and this, in addition to the snug little sum of half a million which he had got from Harry Macdonald for saving his life, kept him from the pangs of poverty.

Micky Flynn got a thousand dollars from the commodore, ten thousand from Flora, and fifty thousand from his friend Tom, and he is now running a first-class hotel in Harlem.

Perhaps none are more happy than the three who suffered the most—Mrs. Walcott, Dick and Nell. They are so closely associated with Tom and Isabel that they know not a single care. To see them driving through Central Park in their elegant equipage, and to notice that, though they are well dressed, they assume no more airs than when they were in the direst poverty, is to feel the effects of a sermon as good as any ever preached. They are noted for their kindness to the poor, especially Dick, whose eyes at the sign of distress or poverty "shed tears as fast as the Arabian trees their medicinal gum." He holds more hearts in his keeping to-day, perhaps, than any other man in New York.

The gentle reader will not take any pleasure in hearing how severely the four villains were punished, but will be satisfied to learn that they were dealt with in a way that—to borrow again from Micky Flynn's vernacular—"heads off the danger of their ever again becomin' obstreperous."

THE END.

Next week's issue, No. 31, will contain "Saved by His Luck; or, What Followed the Yacht Race," by Cornelius Shea.

This is a story of a party of American boys who set out to see the international yacht races between Sir Thomas Lipton's boat and the yacht of the New York Yacht Club.

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- 373. Dick Merriwell's Firmness; or, A Steady Hand and a Sure Heart.
- 374. Frank Merriwell's Gold Train; or, His Great Victory in Mexico.
- 375. Dick Merriwell's Mission; or, From Fardale to West.
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- 27. Frank Warren, Alchemist; or, The Diamond Makers.
- 28. The Jail Breaker of Shirley; or, The Boy Who Dared and Won.
- 29. Robert Brendon, Bell-Boy; or, Under the Hypnotic Spell.



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- 354. Diamond Dick's Double Bill; or, A Hot Turn Between Acts.
- 355. Diamond Dick's Farewell Performance; or, A Warm Go for the Gate Money.



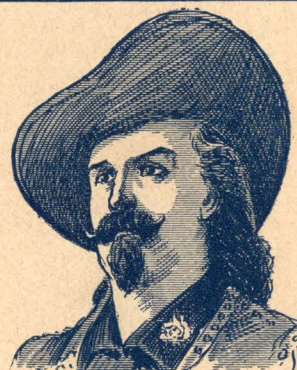
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